On Modern Theatre

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ADRIANO TILGHER

STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

PRECEDED BY AN ESSAY ON
ART AS ORIGINALITY
AND THE PROBLEMS OF ART

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NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

This book represents the finest fruit of four uninterrupted years (1919–23) of work as a theatre critic in the Roman daily press, and of a campaign—admittedly arduous and contested, yet, judging by its effects, not without success, to modernise Italian theatre—still mired in bourgeois and romantic comedy—and to steer it towards an art richer in both lyricism and thought, less particularistic and documentary, and more universally human and spiritual, better suited to the sensibilities of our generation, upon which the devastating whirlwind of war and global crisis has not passed in vain.

If I were to describe the place this book occupies in the history of Italian theatre criticism, I would say that with it the new idealistic and philosophical spirit took hold of the field of theatre criticism – perhaps the only one that had remained untouched by the movement which, in the first quarter of the century, had thoroughly renewed Italian culture and criticism.

That there was a need for such a takeover is demonstrated by the public reception of this book, which, published at the end of November 1922, was already in its second edition by April 1923.

I have taken care to update this edition with the new works that the authors I discuss in the volume have made available to the public during the interval between the two editions, and to enrich it with the most notable results of the numerous controversies sparked by the aesthetic theses that open the book, so that, compared to the first, the second edition is considerably expanded and improved.

Rome, 10 April 1923.

ADRIANO TILGHER.

ART AS ORIGINALITY AND THE PROBLEMS OF ART

The theory outlined in the following pages is the logical development of the Theory of Art Criticism which I first published in 1913 in the *journal* *La Nuova Cultura* (*Rome, Bocca, no. 8*) *and reprinted in the volume* *Teoria del Pragmatismo trascendentale* (*Turin, Bocca, 1915, pp. 119–54*). *I have been applying this theory to my work as a theatre critic and, more generally, as a literary critic. In the form it has now taken in my mind, I first set it out in three articles in* Il Mondo *di Roma* (*14, 17, 22 June 1922*) *in a debate with Lucio d'Ambra, theatre critic* of *L'Epoca* *in Rome—a refined, gentlemanly, chivalrous opponent—a debate which, provoked by my review of a play* (*I Pazzi*) *by Roberto Bracco*[1] *aroused considerable interest in the Italian press. However, as the inevitably fragmentary form that the controversy imposed on the presentation of my viewpoint gave rise to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of my thoughts, I am presenting here, for the first time, an account that is as comprehensive, coherent, systematic and organic as possible, responding point by point to my opponents, foremost among whom is*

1 *Rassegna Italiana*, Rome, 1922, pp. 562–4, for which I have been writing the drama review column since March 1922.

Lucio d'Ambra and Franco Marano (*in* La Ribalta, *Rome, July–August 1922*). *May I be permitted here to publicly thank Professor Giulio Bertoni of the University of Turin and Luigi Miranda, who, the former in* *Arte e Vita* (*Turin, July 1922*) *and the latter in* *Cronache d'Italia* (*Rome, 1922, nos. 5–6*), *wished to lend their authority to my thesis.*

(*Added to the 2nd edition*). *The aesthetic theories set out in the following pages and their application in the essays contained in this volume sparked a storm of controversy upon the publication of the book's first edition. Among the many critics, I replied to G. A. Cesareo* (Mondo, *Rome, 20, 30 December 1922, 3 January 1923*) – *to Gino Doria* (Mondo, *3 January 1923*) – *to Luigi Pirandello* (Comoedia, *Milan, 15 January 1923*) – *to Arrigo Cajumi* (Mondo, *31 January 1923*) – *to Guido Ruberti* (Le opere e i giorni, *Genoa, February 1923*). *From these polemical replies, I have extracted and included in a note to this first essay the most important passages, by way of commentary and clarification of the arguments put forward in the text.*

TO LUCIO D'AMBRA

1.

That art is, in a certain sense, harmonisation, organisation, synthesis—that is, creation and activity—is a point on which agreement has now been reached. But how many have thought deeply and truly grasped the full meaning of the definition—which, through constant repetition, has become trite and banal—that art equals creation and activity? Very few, certainly.

2.

If art is activity and e creation, that is, the production of a synthesis not pre-existing at the moment of its production, it follows that there is as much art in a work that claims to be art as there is originality or novelty: whatever in it is not new, not original, old, imitated or inspired, consciously or unconsciously, by other works of art, corresponds to moments not of creation but of reception, not of activity but of passivity, and therefore is not art. It is therefore impossible to classify works of art as original and non-original: a work of art, as such, is always original, and is a work of art to the exact extent of its originality. It is permissible, however, to distinguish between works of art of great originality and those of little originality: in the sense that the former give rise to a new vision of reality—vast, profound and universal—in which a whole world of relationships is bound together in unity; whilst the latter, on the other hand, move within the orbit of an already existing worldview, merely deepening, elaborating or developing some particular aspect of it, thus giving rise to syntheses which, whilst possessing their own distinct character and unmistakable features in certain particulars, are ultimately traceable, in their laws, rhythms and general systems of relationships, to those already created by others.

3.

It follows directly from this that no work of art can be judged aesthetically in and of itself, without any reference whatsoever to those that preceded it. For it is only by relating it to these that it is possible to judge how much that is new and original—that is, art—is present in the synthesis that constitutes it as a work of art, and how much, on the other hand, has been consciously or unconsciously imitated, accepted or inspired by other works of art. It may happen, for example, that a statue, hitherto judged a marvel of beauty, may, after new archaeological discoveries have brought to light a whole series of buried and forgotten statues, prove to be nothing more than yet another copy of a conventional mould, and thus devoid of any true artistic merit. The same painting attributed to Rembrandt, which is judged a masterpiece, loses all artistic value when documents reveal it to be the work—albeit a highly skilful one—of a modern painter who has perfectly imitated Rembrandt's style. Why? Is it not still the same painting? Certainly. But in the first instance, it appeared to be the product of a fully realised creative process, of a living originality and creation in the making. In the second, however, it appears to be the result of skilful imitation, that is, of a state of relative passivity of the spirit. To destroy from the ground up any pretence of immediacy of taste and judgement, and to establish the equivalence of art criticism and art history, the equivalence of art and originality

is sufficient in itself.

4.

Activity is not an indivisible entity, which either does not exist at all or is given all at once and once and for all: artistic activity, as activity, must necessarily pass through infinite stages, unfolding between a maximum and a minimum. The more it descends towards the minimum, the more the artist tends to become imprisoned within the syntheses created by others, to imitate them, to repeat them, to copy them slavishly, until, at an ideal zero point, the activity ceases entirely and is extinguished in passivity, whereupon the artist ceases altogether to be such; the more it rises towards the maximum, the more new, the more original, the more truly syntheses and creations, the more intense, profound, universal and cosmic are the syntheses that the artist brings into being, until, at an ideal infinite limit, his activity, having overcome all passivity, all the dead weight of pre-existing syntheses that he carries within himself, is celebrated in full bloom, in the intoxicating flight of his originality and absolute novelty. Minimum and maximum attainable only at infinity, and thus practically unattainable: for in the former the artist would no longer be an artist at all, and in the latter he would be so in an absolute sense, with no imperfection remaining within him, and thus beyond the conditions of humanity. But the fact that artistic activity tends towards a maximum that appears to it as an ideal is what allows us to formulate the following artistic categorical imperative: – strive to be totally, absolutely, unconditionally an artist, that is, a creator, that is, original; the more original you are, the more you will be an artist –.

A categorical imperative, a duty, which does not come to the artist from without; it is not a heteronomous command, but springs from the very heart of the activity that constitutes him as an artist; it presents itself to the artist as the ideal of that highest point, of that ultimate end in which the activity that makes him an artist is wholly and solely activity, wholly and solely itself.

5.

Ultimately, the total synthesi ly and absolutely synthesis—that is, originality, that is, art—is that in which nothing pre-exists as synthesis; which, before itself, as its ideal antecedent, has no pre-formed syntheses, but only a formless, chaotic multiplicity to be organised and reduced to unity; and of which it, as a synthesis perfectly such—that is, new and original—makes a well-ordered and coherent world. Now, when is it that the artist experiences within himself this formless and chaotic multiplicity, entirely on this side of form, such that by giving it form, organising it into unity and making it into a world, his synthesis will be totally and absolutely synthesis, that is, originality, that is, activity, that is, art? Only when he experiences within himself, not abstractly but immediately, the life of his time, of his present.

6.

The law and rhythm of Life is to be a formless entity aspiring to Form, yet one that no form definitively imprisons, and which dissolves, fluidifies and transcends every form already attained, time and again. Every form, in which Life has once, at a given moment, expressed itself to itself, tends to stiffen, to crystallise, to enclose within its banks the flow of Life, which, by the very fact of having expressed and revealed itself to itself in that form, has changed and renewed itself in its innermost being, so that that form no longer reveals or expresses it. Once born of Life as an expression, a revelation and, as such, a liberation of Life, it becomes, over time, an obstacle and a stumbling block to Life, which it no longer expresses. It no longer expresses it because it no longer comprehends it. It no longer comprehends it because it lies on this side of what Life has become by the very fact of having passed through that form and having expressed itself therein. It is therefore urgent to dissolve and break it, and to give Life—that new formless state into which Life has become—a new form in which the old is both upheld and negated as a moment that has been surpassed. Formless, therefore, is Life only insofar as it is a process of dissolving old forms and yearning for new ones; insofar as it is a transition from the form that is no longer to that which is not yet, from the past to the future, insofar, that is, as it is present in act and in reality. Only by participating intimately in its present, coinciding with it as much as possible, living as the present

In this process, the artist experiences within themselves a formlessness that is not merely a simple absence of form, but a living yearning to break free from old forms perceived as inadequate and to forge new ones. The more the artist experiences within himself this yearning, this anxiety, this need to break free from the old and create the new, the more he coincides with what is not chronologically but ideally the present, the more he becomes present and lives as the present in the making, and the more his dependence on old syntheses dissolves, the passivity within him diminishes, his novelty and originality grow, and the organising activity gains the possibility of delving deep, of going far, of spreading its wings freely. The artist cannot experience the formless within himself except by experiencing Life within himself as the present in action, for the present alone is, by definition, Life in the act of its becoming, formless yet yearning for form: the past is that which is already formed, that which no longer lives and no longer becomes[2] . The artistic categorical imperative formulated above can, therefore, also be put this way: – give artistic form to the Life of your time, to your present; live as the present in the act and express it artistically; experience Life as the present, as formless, as a problem and find its solution; live and solve the problems of your

2 It is therefore foolish to ask me, as some have done, how long the present lasts and whether the past is the second before, or the minute before, or the hour, or the day, or the month, or the year, or the century before. The present is Life in the act of unfolding as such: and it may last as little as a fraction of a second (for example: an organic reflex that arises and passes in a flash) or as long as centuries (for example: a cultural movement that slowly develops, over the course of hundreds of years, the possibilities contained within it).

time –. *Originality* is, therefore, entirely equivalent to *contemporaneity* and *topicality*[3].

3 The argument that originality is a formally necessary element of a work of art has been countered by the far-fetched claim that the vast majority of masterpieces have been created from themes and structures that are anything but original or contemporary. But it is quite evident that by originality here we do not mean novelty of subject, plot or narrative (a form of originality that is not to be despised, as is commonly assumed, if Sophocles sought it in *Philoctetes* and Euripides *in Electra*), but spiritual originality: a new meaning, a new taste, a new flavour, a new experience of life, which can, certainly, certainly express itself through new material, but can also take hold of old material, remote in time from the artist, and turn it, consciously or unconsciously, into a new creation. Indeed, almost always, to express the new sense of life that stirs vaguely and confusedly within his contemporaries, the artist turns to characters and events of times gone by: for these, distant as they are in time, detached from the contingent and ephemeral passions and interests that characters and events of the immediate present arouse, afford the artist that distance, that projection into the universal and the absolute, which events and characters of the immediate present more difficultly permit.

7.

Undoubtedly, what makes an artist an artist is not the mere experience of problems as such, but their artistic resolution: one may agonisingly experience the problem – or some aspect of the problem – of one's own time and existence, yet remain incapable of resolving it artistically, so that the resulting work has no value other than documentary. Experiencing the problem of time within oneself—time as a problem, as the present, as formless—is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the work of art. But an artist is only one who gives form to the problem of his time, one who experiences his time within himself as a problem in the making and to the extent that he experiences it: outside of this, he can only wander amongst the already formed and therefore, as such, crystallised and dead syntheses and forms of the past. Moreover, the problem of time never, or almost never, finds its artistic solution all at once. The masterpiece is like a perfectly clear vision which is usually reached only through a series of partially flawed, not perfectly focused visions, joined and bound together by a single, living effort towards that clear and limpid vision. This single, living effort, to the success of which numerous artists contribute, is the problem as a living reality, in the act of striving towards its solution. The artist, whether great or small, is distinguished from the more or less intelligent craftsman by this, and by this alone: that the craftsman does not pose problems for himself, does not experiment

a formless aspiration to dissolve into form, but simply manipulates and combines, more or less skilfully, forms that are already made and realised. He therefore does not truly live in the present, as the present, but in the past, as the past; that is to say, artistically, he does not live, he is dead[4] .

4 A failed work is a more or less skilful composition, a more or less successful mosaic; it is not an organic unity, it fails to fuse into a living organism the elements of which it is composed and which it owes to other works of art. To recognise them as elements already in circulation is to deny the artist's creative act, and thus art itself. It is an undeniable fact that the majority of people live not by ideas they create and form from within, through their own effort, but by ideas that are already beautiful and formed, accepted from without; they feed on moods solidified into practical or verbal expressions, worn out by use like old coins: in a word, they live not in the present but in the past. Hence Oscar Wilde said that many people live, suffer and kill themselves for the sake of *quotations*.

8.

The formless, the present, the problem: Life, as formless, as present, as a problem in the sense defined above, is indeterminate. However, insofar as it is formless—not a mere absence of form that any form might fill indiscriminately—but formless in the sense that it contains within itself these and those forms of the past and strives towards its own form, still indeterminate, certain, and therefore unpredictable and left to the artist's creative freedom, yet which cannot be just any form—since it can at least be said that it will not be one of the many forms of the past—the problem is a determinate entity. Indeterminate in that it has not yet found its solution; determined in that it is a problem or vital anxiety, so much so that it can very well be distinguished from the problems of times past. It is a determinacy that is not static but dynamic, not of a thing but of a tendency, reconciling itself very well as such with the indeterminacy of the point of arrival. Indeterminate which, whilst being as such, is determined insofar as it is a struggle and a search for determination: indeterminate determined insofar as it is indeterminate, that is, the process of the indeterminate towards its determination; this is the problem, the present, the formless, Life as a problem, as the present, as the formless, which breathlessly urges towards expression and form. A living contradiction that the abstract intellect cannot grasp, because it tends irresistibly to break down that living, seething fluidity into

fixed, rigid, immobile terms. A few examples will clarify the matter better.

9.

We have all, at some point, found ourselves unable to recall a name or a word at the moment we need it – even though we know we know it – and racked our brains to retrieve it from memory. What takes place in the mind when this phenomenon occurs? Evidently, the mind of the seeker is in a state of indeterminacy and emptiness; it does not remember and wants to remember, it no longer has and wants to have again, it has lost and wants to find again, it has fallen into poverty and wants to become rich again. It is empty, but not an inert emptiness indifferent to whatever content might fill it; rather, it is animated by a sort of horror of the void, which drives it to seek out a content—not just any content, but a specific content to fill it. It is an indeterminacy that does not lie there, immobile and sterile, but struggles in search of its determination. It is ignorance that is, at once and in a single act, a process towards knowledge; it is inexpression that is a vital yearning towards expression. In that state of inner turmoil we do not yet know, and yet we know something, so much so that if someone suggests a word to us that is not the one we are seeking, we immediately reject it. And we also know that the word we seek is enclosed within certain boundaries. We could not point out those boundaries, we could not trace them with clear and definite lines, yet we feel that they exist and that they enclose our inner search within a well-defined field of possibilities. That void is, therefore, a void that is also,

in a certain sense, full. That indeterminate is a determinate that is not quite so. That unspoken is an unspoken which, though it has not yet found its expression, has already marked out in advance the field in which it will find it. And indeed, that expression, at a certain moment unexpected and unanticipated, flashes with the speed of lightning, springing from the mysterious depths of the spirit. The word we were seeking and had not yet found, here it is at last: it is here! For what it is worth, there is a fundamental difference between the state of mind described here and the problems that Life and Culture pose at a certain moment: there it is a matter of remembering, and here of creating. Now, creation = freedom, unpredictability. Nothing necessitates that those problems of life find their artistic solution: history knows of silent periods, dead zones, the barren deserts of art. Whether there will be a solution, and what form it will take, cannot be said in advance. But it can be established in advance that if there is to be a solution, it will be to problems identified in such and such a way. Freedom and determination together, therefore. No predetermined course for the river of Life; this carves its own bed as it flows, and yet the direction of its movement is clearly discernible.

10.

I should add, for the sake of clarity – though perhaps there is no need to do so – that when I speak of the problems of the time with which the artist grapples, of Life as a problem, as the present, as a formless entity experienced within oneself – and all the more so the more one is an artist – I do not in any way intend to allude to the individual technical, political, legal, moral, social or religious problems that Life in that time poses and resolves: problems experienced as such, but in a sphere of activity distinct from the artistic one. For an artist, a problem is purely and simply the spirit's new attitude towards the world and Life, the new meaning, the new taste, the new flavour, the new experience of Life and of the world in which the spirit has come to take its stand, which holds within itself, as presupposed and dissolved moments, the forms of the past—of its own past—and seeks a new form that adapts to it and expresses it to itself. In its very definiteness, therefore, the problem thus understood is an indeterminate entity which, as such, can be refracted through multiple individual temperaments, assuming a particular hue in each, without however ever losing its definiteness as a problem historically identified in this or that way. It certainly admits a multiplicity of solutions, though all converging in a specific direction, the functional lines of which can be traced, and which are precisely those that characterise the art of a specific historical period. In the problem thus understood, there is, therefore, room for everyone, for talents and for

geniuses, each with their own world, with their own individual character and, nonetheless, all carried by the same spiritual wave, all united by a single labour, perfectly identifiable and definable as a wave and a labour. The fact that the problem is, in its indeterminacy, determined does not, therefore, imply that the solution must be unique and that for every era there is room for only a single work of art. Moreover, the more profound, original and intense a work of art is, the more its contemporary works of lesser depth and breadth tend to be resolved and ideally nullified within the liberating and clarifying word it utters. The fact is that the horizon dominated by these works is ideally encompassed and nullified in its particularity within the vaster and more solemn horizon embraced from the heights of the masterpiece. Centuries later, a masterpiece characterises an age, a period, a stretch of the path traversed by humanity in its arduous journey: and the more a work of art ascends towards the masterpiece, the more, by depersonalising itself, by detaching itself from the transient, contingent, individual empirical particularities of the artist's temperament, it tends to coincide with the deep soul of the time that is its own, of its present, of its life, to reveal the secret of all, to speak the word that all invoke, await and hope for[5] .

5 Gino Doria posed an interesting question to me. Let us imagine – he said – an artist who, travelling back through time, intimately experiencing the distant era to which he has returned, produces the work of art that no one in that time was capable of creating and gives it a form that may seem old to us but, for

11.

Life presents itself as a problem wherever it seeks new forms, having within itself overcome and dissolved the old ones. There are, therefore, as many problems as there are currents of Life; by 'current of Life' we mean that which flows through a multitude of forms and expressions without being exhausted in any of them, uniting them all in the living continuity of a single endeavour. The problems of a dialectal life are not those of a national life; they follow a different rhythm and a different law, and therefore demand different expressions. In two civilisations running parallel to one another, with little or no mutual influence, the problems present themselves to each in a different and incommunicable way: the ideal present of one has nothing to do with the ideal present of the other. But among the various vital currents, one can very well establish hierarchies of values, and judge, at

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that time, would have been quite novel: has the work of art, the creation, the originality, the relevance been achieved or not? 'I have no doubt that the answer is yes,' he wrote. The case is not as abstract as it might seem: one need only recall the humanist literature of the fifteenth century. Let us imagine, then, an artist who turns his whole being towards the Latins—indeed, the Latins of a certain period—and relives their lives so intensely as to be, in an ideal sense, their fellow citizen, and gives form to this inner life of his in a work of verse or prose: is it a work of art or not? I reply: I do not deny that it may be art, but not great art, nor true novelty or originality, because the life experience to which the artist would in such a case give form, he would not have felt within himself as a formless mass to which he had first given shape; rather, he would have drawn it from the forms given to it by the great Latin artists and writers. In relation to them, he would be in the precise position of a disciple to a master, an imitator to a model.

For example, the issues of 20th-century Italian literature far outweigh those of Neapolitan dialectal literature of the same period, just as the Italian spirit and way of life were far richer, more complex, diverse and nuanced than the Neapolitan spirit and way of life of that time. Given that the historical conditions of Western civilisation had, at least to a certain extent, brought about a unity of vital current throughout Europe, one may speak, provided one allows the term sufficient scope, of a single artistic problem that the Western European spirit faces in the 20th century, in the sense of a single attitude and reaction towards Life and the meaning, taste, flavour and experience of Life that history has been creating throughout Europe and which now eagerly seeks its expression. And the criterion of judgement for artists changes depending on whether one moves from one current of Life to another, as it would be absurd to demand of the artists of one current the solution to problems that trouble those of another. And only in this way is it possible to organise and construct a history of art. From the point of view of pure form, pure expression, pure style, it is not possible. Work *a* is, hypothetically, perfectly successful; work *b* is, hypothetically, also successful: how, from the point of view of pure form, pure style, pure expression, can one arrange them in a series, link them together in the continuity of a development? Each remains enclosed within its own form. One does not pass from one to the other. But from work of art *A* the historian moves to work of art *B* inasmuch as the Life that expresses itself and takes form in *B* is the same as that which,

an earlier moment of its development, expressed itself and took shape in *a*, has within itself as a presupposed moment the Life that expressed itself and took shape in *a*, and therefore, indirectly, also has within itself the form *a*. And, therefore, one must place *b* after *a* and not vice versa, because *b* has within itself the Life that expressed itself in *a* and *a* does not have within itself the Life that expressed itself in *b*. Only by approaching the concept of Life not as an immobile quantity, but as a formless entity that takes shape from time to time—and by the very act of taking shape renews itself in its depths and transcends the form it has taken, yearning towards a new form—is it possible to arrange works of art in a series, as the artistic expression of the various stages of development of a single vital current.

12.

A thorough examination of the equation 'art = originality' allows us to re-establish the hierarchy among works of art that some have denied. It is said that a madrigal, when successful, is neither more nor less successful, nor more nor less beautiful than a great poem that is, hypothetically, perfectly successful – for example, the *Divine Comedy*. But in the madrigal, the artist's creative activity has produced a particularly narrow and limited synthesis, which has as its ideal antecedent nothing more than a formless entity, a vibration of life, a feeling that is equally narrow and limited. In *the Divine Comedy*, on the other hand, it has produced a gigantic synthesis, a new vision of the world and of life, which has as its ideal antecedent a formless entity, a vibration of life, a feeling that is equally universal. Dante's independence from the old syntheses, his originality, his efficiency and artistic power are, therefore, far greater than those of the madrigalist. One artist is all the greater than another insofar as his vision of the world and of life, his morality, his philosophy, his religion are deeper, vaster and more cosmic; and his synthetic power and creative activity are all the greater. Understanding form not as an immobile and dead form, as *a formed form*, but as form in action, as formative activity, as *a forming form*, capable of infinite degrees of intensity, Dante is, from the point of view of pure form, infinitely superior to the madrigalist, and the *Divine*

Comedy infinitely more beautiful than the most successful madrigal[6] .

6 An artist who fully and clearly expresses a vision of the world and of life will therefore be superior to other artists who express that same vision only fragmentarily or confusingly: the work of the former will swallow up and nullify the works of the latter, just as Moses' serpent swallowed up the serpents of the Egyptian magicians. One artist will be judged superior to another who lived in a different era and within a different cultural current—and who therefore grappled with different issues—if the former has given form to a broader and deeper vision of the world and of life than the latter, who, hypothetically, lived in the shadow of visions borrowed from others and limited himself to exploring and developing them in some detail. But no hierarchy of values will be established among artists (Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe) who, having lived in different times and cultures, have equally been able to draw upon their spiritual world.

By making originality a formally necessary aspect of the work of art, and by obliging critics to investigate how much an artist owes to his contemporaries or predecessors, one helps to break down the barrier erected by rhetoric between the various arts. It is not necessarily the case that the influence of one artist on another should be understood solely as that which the writer experiences from the writer, the painter from the painter, the musician from the musician, and so on. Everyday experience shows us that the arts influence one another, and that the great movements arising within one art form sooner or later have repercussions within the others. Our theory tends to conceive the history of art as the unfolding of a single movement, in which all the arts influence one another: poetry influences painting, music influences the visual arts, and so on. Already in *The Theory of Art Criticism* I observed that one of the flaws in De Sanctis's *History of Italian Literature* was the Great Wall of China erected around our literature, which was, admittedly, placed in relation to the

13.

The theory set out above has been accused of *contentism*. It all depends on how one understands the word 'content'. If by 'content' one means a specific theory, theme, subject, matter or problem, and the theory set out above is interpreted to mean that the greater, lesser or zero value of a work of art depends on whether it deals to a greater or lesser extent with, or fails to deal with at all, specific identified technical, social, legal, political, moral or philosophical problems, then there is no theory less content-oriented than ours. Ours measures the originality of the work of art by the intensity with which the artist experiences within themselves and elaborates a formless entity, a yearning for life that has not yet found its form and which urges and rushes towards it. Now, content understood in that way is, on the contrary, already formed, in a non-artistic sphere: by taking it as the content of his work, the artist would not already be experiencing a formless state within himself; on the contrary, he would passively accept a subject matter, a given, that is, something determined and formed that others would present to him already complete and finished. Insofar as he makes the experience of a formless entity—that is, of something which is not yet conceived as a determined, concluded, fixed existence—but wants to be, the condition necessary (even if not

reality of life (although, even this, in the Romantic manner, was understood in an overly narrow political and social sense), but considered to be on this side of any substantial and intimate relationship with the other arts. The major scholarly studies undertaken since De Sanctis have highlighted the enormous influence that painting in the seventeenth century and music in the eighteenth century exerted on the other arts, literature in the first instance.

sufficient) of the work of art, our theory is the least content-oriented one imaginable. It imposes no content upon artistic activity in the sense of a specific and defined subject matter: understood in this way, content would be being and not problem, form and not formless. But where by content we mean that formless entity in the sense defined above of Life as problem, as present, as becoming, and our theory is interpreted to mean that the more radically the artist frees himself from dependence on the old syntheses that are and no longer become, the more intensely he experiences Life within himself as that (in its indeterminacy) determined formless state that it now is, the more he realises within himself the necessary (if not sufficient) condition for creating a work of art; in this sense, our theory is content-oriented. And in its apparent paradoxicality, which is close to common sense, it always demands of the artist that they not linger in old, outdated forms that give shape to a life which, by the very fact of having already found its form, is no longer ours, but that they give form to the new life that has taken shape within us and demands its expression. In the sense we give to the word, content is not already added from outside to form: it is the very analysis of the concept of art = form or synthesis that has revealed it to us as a transcendental condition of the work of art. It is by examining the concept of form that we have discovered in it one of the moments of which content consists, in the sense we give to

this word[7] .

7 One need only understand form not as *a formed form*, but as a formative form, as a formative activity in action, for it immediately becomes clear that it is inconceivable without something to be formed that ideally pre-exists it; and if this something is to be formed and not already formed, it follows that it is a formless entity, a blind life not yet spiritually organised. Understood in this way, it is evident that the
'stylist who creates a beautiful literary form without expressing in it anything of the problems of his time' (Guido Ruberti), that is, without experiencing within himself a formless state, a new feeling for life, does not truly create a form, but merely handles forms created by others: he is a craftsman, albeit a skilled and intelligent one, not an artist; a man of letters, not a poet. The form he creates is not a formative form, but a form which he finds already beautiful and formed.

14.

r our theory, correctly understood, thus refutes all accusations that might be levelled against it—such as sociologism, imitationism and the like. These are all theories that require the artist to adopt as the content of his work a reality that already exists in and outside of him as reality: reality in itself is already formed as such; the artist is expected to imitate or portray it in his work. Instead, content as we understand it is nothing external to the artist; indeed, it is entirely internal to him, springing from within as the immediate experience of a vital anxiety; it is nothing that exists in the sense of a closed and determined existence. Since this yearning is the very same that stirs the deepest fibres of the society in which the artist lives, by giving it form, the artist ends up portraying society as well, insofar as society itself is not a given but a living problem. For sociologism in all its shades, the content is, in itself, a given and not a problem, which the artist finds and takes on, not creates; for our theory, however, it is a living problem within the artist and outside the artist; it is nothing other than Life in the act of its becoming.

15.

From the equation art = originality follows a conception of the critic's attitude and duties towards works of art that are taking shape before his very eyes, one that is entirely different from the common and vulgar view. According to this view, the critic should passively wait for the masterpiece to fall from the sky onto his head like a meteorite: when this auspicious event occurs, he will not fail to recognise and celebrate it. Whilst waiting, the critic would be *a blank slate* with regard to the masterpiece, entirely devoid of any clues by which to recognise it. But by what criterion will the critic judge that this work is new and original, whilst that other work merely reheats and rehashes old themes? It is clear that in order to pass such a judgement, he must first have a concept that is as comprehensive, all-encompassing and universal as possible of what Life has already achieved in the past (the old) and of what, transcending all that has gone before, it is striving to achieve today (the new); he must have a clear concept of the demands, anxieties, torments and problems of life today. How can one decide that a particular work of art is new, contemporary, original and ours—and therefore, precisely, a work of art—unless one first has a concept—however obscure, confused or imprecise—of that spiritual world still unexpressed and desperately seeking its expression; unless one has, precisely, implicitly or explicitly, clearly or confusingly, posed to the artists the problems for which

we demand they solve? How can we judge that the vision of Life a work of art offers us is new, contemporary and our own, unless we have fully taken stock of the past, unless we have a clear, comprehensive and coherent concept of it? [8] . To criticise is to judge. To judge is to situate within history, to place in its proper place within the general movement of the spirit. Every critique presupposes, explicitly or implicitly, a general vision of the world and of life, a synthetic conception of the history of humanity. In every critical judgement, however humble, the entire history of humanity and art is implicit or explicit. Having a clear idea of the problem of our times, of that specific yearning to create a new world which defines our era and gives it an unmistakable character, is a necessary condition, an indispensable prerequisite for engaging in serious criticism, for recognising the masterpiece if tomorrow it

8 This explains the impotence of dramatic criticism as it has been practised in Italy up to now.

She had erected a Great Wall of China around the theatre: if one were to believe her, it lived a life of its own, operating according to its own laws, and nothing beyond the stage could touch it. Naturally, lacking any cultural reference points of the time, theatre critics were utterly powerless to judge whether the playwrights were merely rehashing old, exhausted positions and situations or, on the contrary, seeking to express new ways of seeing and feeling Life, and what these might be. *Given the circumstances*, criticism could be, and was, nothing but purely technical; having adopted a model of theatre and fixed it for eternity as the only possible and conceivable form of theatre, it condemned or extolled a work depending on whether it conformed to this model or not. To put an end to this kind of criticism, it was necessary to tear down the Great Wall erected around the theatre, to regard it not as a rock but as a wave amongst waves in the ocean of life and culture. This has always been the aim of my work as a critic.

will present.

16.

The critic, therefore, poses or proposes problems for the artist to solve. Better still: he expects the artist to solve them, and, whilst waiting for him to do so, he sets them out for him. He sets them out because Life has posed them to him and he believes that he must pose them—and has posed them—to the artist worthy of the name. Those problems are not, therefore, external to the author's innermost being, just as the master's theme is to the disciple's innermost being. They are posed or imposed by Life itself upon the author and the critic. It is Life itself that, in both, poses them to itself, that, in both, presents itself as a problem. The artist certainly does not need to wait for the critic to formulate those problems for him in order to know them: if he is a true artist, he experiences them and formulates them himself. This does not preclude the possibility that a perceptive critic might enlighten an author in search of himself as to what his true problem is, and help to clarify its terms for him, making clear what is stirring within him in a confused and unexpressed state, and arousing and unleashing the latent energies within him. It is objected that criticism neither foresees nor prepares, but explains. Yet here, foreseeing what is brewing beneath the surface of old forms is nothing other than experiencing the surge of life striving to break free beyond them: to experience it, and thereby to work towards clearing the way for it. Indeed, what are the artistic movements that burst forth from time to time if not criticism in action, living and pulsating criticism, which shatters the old and affirms the need for the new, foresees it and

prepares? What is Futurism, for example, if not a movement that is apparently artistic but in reality critical, poetically almost barren, yet critically of the utmost importance as the destruction of the old poetic world and the heralding and preparation of the new that is to come? The great and definitive critic is the one who comes in the evening and takes stock of the day. But his work was prepared by the lesser critics, who, by stirring the waters, arguing, raging, destroying, inciting and exalting, act as midwives to the birth of the masterpiece and hasten the slow passage of time[9] . The critic is not the bird of Minerva that spreads its wings at dusk when the day's work is done and people have gone to bed: he is the seagull that flies on the wings of the wind and heralds the storm rising on the horizon. One cannot deny the danger inherent in criticism understood in this way: namely, that it may crystallise into precise formulas and, on this basis, either exalt or destroy. But what human endeavours are not exposed to the danger of degeneration? The critics of critics will provide a safeguard against this.

9 This conception of criticism has met with fierce resistance. It has been argued that the critic cannot collaborate with the artist in pointing out the problems of the age. One counter-example, just one, but one that is worth a thousand: in 1836, Giuseppe Mazzini, in *his *Philosophy of Music**, deemed the music of his time to be exhausted and pointed out to music precisely those same problems that, fifteen years later, Wagner would pose and splendidly resolve. The problem is a yearning for life, a new meaning and experience of life in the making, and why should the critic be denied the right to feel it as the artist does, and perhaps even before him?

17.

Does the theory set out above make the value of a work of art dependent on contingent and historical elements? The value of a work of art lies entirely and solely in its form, in its expression, in its style, and that is to say in the peculiarity, intensity, depth and breadth of the synthesis that constitutes it. Once established as a synthesis, and that is to say as a spiritual value, the work of art retains its worth for eternity. That which was born as art, as originality, novelty and activity, remains so for eternity, even if the Life that was expressed in it fades and sets. Jupiter dies, and the poet's hymn remains. For through all the forms in which it expresses itself, Life always remains Life, and in each form, all of Life in that particular form, capable of being relived and experienced for eternity. Nothing grows old except that which was born old. That which was born new remains so for ever. But, as we have shown, a work of art is not born new; that is to say, it is not born, *tout court*, except as a solution to that living problem which is the present in action, and only by sinking its roots into it does it raise high its branches, leaves and flowers. Only that which was born as living and concrete actuality endures for ever. That which was born outside of living and concrete actuality dies, or rather, never lives at all. That which was born alive and not dead lives eternally; only that which was born as the present knows no decline; that which was born as the past was never truly born at all, it was always past and dead. And if there is no other

way to understand a work of art than to recreate as faithfully as possible its ideal genesis, it follows that one cannot appreciate, evaluate, or judge a work of art without re-presenting the problems that Life posed to the artist, situating the artist and his work as closely as possible within the flow of the life that was his, by re-enacting within oneself the process through which the artist freed himself from old forms, experiencing within oneself the new breath of life, expressing it and giving it form. That the solution the artist gave to his problem (hypothetically, let us suppose it perfect) is perfectly adequate, one can only immediately feel and experience, just as immediate was the act by which a formless and chaotic multitude organised itself into form. It is impossible to demonstrate that an artistic form is truly a form, that is, an adequate expression: one might as well trace that form back to other pre-existing ones. And if that were possible, it would mean that there is no work of art in that case. Either one recreates within oneself the process by which the work of art came into being—and which, as a process, is activity, creation, and therefore originality—or one does not: in the first case, one appreciates the beauty of the work of art, the work of art as such; in the second case, one does not. But in order to recreate within oneself that specific, identified process through which the work of art, identified in this particular way, came into being, it is absolutely necessary to return to the moment when that ideal genesis took place, and this can only be achieved by situating the work of art within the

the general course of history[10] . Only in specific cases is it possible to judge whether the artist merely repeated old forms or rather created something new by synthesising a formless entity – a specific formless entity yearning for form – and to what extent his synthesis exhausted the depths of this formless entity.

10 This precisely explains why a work that appeared beautiful may lose all or part of its beauty on the day when irrefutable evidence reveals it to be an imitation or copy of another: for then the generative process by which we understood it has been radically transformed, becoming something else and its opposite. It has been objected that only the critic, not the layman, not the ordinary spectator, not the common reader, can—if they succeed—recreate the process by which the work of art came into being: and so how is it explained that these too enjoy and applaud the work of art? I reply: even the uninitiated, even the ordinary spectator and the common reader, appreciate the work of art aesthetically insofar as they judge it critically, that is, they place it within a general view of the history of the spirit; a judgement, certainly, that is confused, approximate and crude, and hence their taste is crude, approximate and confused. As they ascend to a higher level of culture, refining their judgement, they refine their taste, and what once pleased them no longer does. But more often than not, the pleasure that a work of art arouses in the passive spectator or the ordinary reader has nothing to do with aesthetic judgement: it is a purely physical and sensual pleasure, differing in degree, not in quality, from the pleasure of good food or drink; it is the pleasure of having one's ear caressed by a beautiful melody, of witnessing a curious and interesting interweaving of unusual events, of feeling one's dominant passions or interests tickled, distracted from the worries of daily life, and so on. All this certainly requires no critical preparation, sets no historical judgement in motion, but has nothing to do with taste and aesthetic judgement, which are critical and historical taste and judgement.

18.

Art criticism and art history are one and the same. And precisely because history is always a work in progress and is constantly being renewed, art criticism is also a work in progress and is constantly being renewed. The judgement we pass today on Homer's *Iliad*, the taste we have for it, is not that of the men of Louis XIV's age, who were insensitive to the poem's charm because they were entirely unaware of what Homer had meant to say, of the problem he had sought to resolve, of the vital experience he had sought to give form to: Vico's discovery of the 'barbaric moment' of the spirit, by presenting in a new light the problem Homer had sought to resolve, overturned the judgement previously held of it. Today, *the Iliad* tends to be seen as a courtly poem not unlike the chivalric poems of our fifteenth century, and this new historical perspective, by profoundly altering our view of the Homeric problem, also alters the appreciation and judgement we can make regarding its solution. Major new historical discoveries regarding pre-Homeric Greece would present *the Iliad* to us in a light that we cannot even remotely imagine today. One understands by doing what one wishes to understand. And since the re-doing does not and will never completely coincide with the first doing, criticism is therefore eternal and is forever in the making[11] . On the other hand, if

11 Gino Doria objected that in this theory art criticism becomes a curse of Cain, a tremendously difficult task, and

were it possible to appreciate and judge a work of art aesthetically not by mentally reconstructing its genesis, but by standing before it as one would before an *opus operatum*, this would mean that in the work of art there is a *certain something* that immediately strikes the reader or listener or the spectator; and this certain *something* that operates

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frightening. Since no work of art can be judged independently of those that preceded it – for only in this way can one determine how much of it is new, that is, of art – it follows that, strictly speaking, to judge a work of art correctly, one would need to know everything that the human spirit has produced from its appearance on earth up to the moment that work came into being, and not only in art, but in all branches of human activity. This being impossible, no critical judgement is ever definitive.

Strictly speaking, yes, and that is precisely what our theory asserts: *it is the only theory* that renders radically impossible any critical judgement that claims to be definitive. It assigns the critic a superhuman and unachievable task: to identify the work of art within the course of universal history, to trace the course of world history until it culminates in that work of art. Any immediacy of taste and judgement is thus shattered. In order to deliver a definitive judgement, the critic would have to retrace the course of the world right up to the work of art to be judged; in short, to be equal to God. A task that is practically impossible to achieve. The critic, therefore, works with the full awareness of the precariousness and provisional nature of his work, with the awareness that what he asserts has, and can have, only a partial, provisional and relative truth. The joy of resting on his judgement and exclaiming: *'hic manebimus optime!'* is forever denied him. He must cultivate a state of mind of heroic despair, embrace his condemnation and make it his vocation. This makes the critic's profession infinitely less comfortable and pleasant than the naive imagine; for, by putting down on paper the impressions a work of art has generated after lunch in their exalted minds, seriously believe they have been sworn in as jurors in the Court of History; but it is also the only thing that can endow the critic's work with an ideal nobility that places it no higher, certainly, but no lower either than that of the artist: the *re-creating* alongside the *creating*. 'Who is the true critic if not he who carries within himself the dreams and

immediately, being immediate in itself, and therefore incapable of being more or less so; it would either strike immediately or not, be savoured at once or not, be grasped all at once and once and for all or not. Criticism would have no history: it would be done all at once and once and for all, and not eternally to be redone. And to engage in criticism, there would be no need for culture or historical preparation: it would suffice to stand before the work of art and wait, open-mouthed, for the revelation of beauty. Criticism would become a very convenient affair, far more convenient than it is in our theory of the radical reduction of taste and criticism to history.

'the ideas and feelings of myriads of generations, and to which no form of thought is alien, no impulse of emotion obscure?': these are the words of Oscar Wilde, a critic no less refined and subtle than he was an exquisite artist. In practical and empirical terms, it is not necessary for the critic, before passing judgement, to be familiar with all, without exception, the works of art that have appeared on earth prior to the one they wish to judge: it suffices for them to grasp what I would call the overall and comprehensive sense of their contemporaneity.

19.

For another reason— t is impossible to appreciate and understand a work of art other than by reconstructing its ideal genesis within oneself, framing it within the general movement of the spirit from which it emerged. The work of art is a synthesis or a system of syntheses that arose as virgin, new, original creations: the creation of relationships that did not pre-exist as such at the moment of their creation. But once a work of art has come into being, it enters the circulation of thought: it is read, studied, imitated, copied, repeated, exploited, plundered. With the passing of time, the syntheses that constitute it as a work of art lose the air of novelty, originality and the unexpected that they possessed at the moment of their first appearance. To appreciate and judge the work of art in terms of what is truly its own, new, original—that is, artistic—is therefore impossible unless one places oneself in the context of its ideal genesis, in order to experience as fully as possible the effect of surprise, the unexpected and the new that it produced at its very inception[12] .

12 Anyone who, like me, sees the artist above all as a creator of synthesis, a discoverer of new connections and relationships, an inventor of new systems and structures of images – thanks to which, where before there was thick darkness or indifferent mist, one sees or begins to see something – will have no difficulty in recognising that, just as one can see things only dimly and yet be the first to see, and to see great things, so too can one be a confused and approximate writer and, nonetheless, a truly great artist. Of course, the ideal is to reconcile the two: to be the first to see and to see with a clear and sharp eye, and there are artists who do reconcile them: Sophocles, Petrarch, Manzoni. But the uncertainty and imprecision of vision can be perfectly reconciled with its originality and novelty, and, that is to say, precisely with its value

20.

The artist created by giving form to a certain formless mass that stirred within him: to recreate within oneself the process by which that formless mass gave way to that form is the only way to understand the work of art. And since that formless mass is the artist's present—that specific present arising from that specific past—one cannot appreciate and judge the work of art without recreating that present arising from that past, that is, without recreating living history in the very act of its first coming into being.

artistic. In the wake of these great inventors often come artists of lesser stature, who, having not had to expend the best of their energies on discovering new worlds and new horizons, but working in a world already discovered by others, can devote themselves to clearing away whatever was convoluted and confused in the creators' expressions.

APPENDIX

The relationship between art and history in the aesthetics of Benedetto Croce and in our own.

The relationship between the artist and his time, or, in more philosophically precise terms, between Art and History, has always been one of the most thorny issues in Benedetto Croce's system. On this subject, Croce's thinking underwent a complex evolution marked by perplexities and doubts, the history of which would be too long to recount here: long and pointless, not least because G. A. Borgese has already done so in a lively polemical essay published in the first issue of the journal *Il Conciliatore* (Rome, 1914). After that, driven by the internal logic of his position, and perhaps by the very attacks of his opponents, Croce went on to refine his thinking ever more precisely; its definitive form, at least for now, is set out in the essay *'The Reform of Artistic and Literary History'* included in *Nuovi Saggi di Estetica* (Bari, 1917, pp. 161–84).

The task of criticism – Croce asserts here – is to provide 'the characteristic of the individual artist, of his personality and of his work, which converge into one'. A characteristic that 'is nothing static or naturalistic, but is intrinsically and eminently genetic and historical, and is realised as the delineation of personality and works as they unfold'. What does

work of art: the work of art is a certain tone, or accent, or individual, ineffable and incomparable *Stimmung*; in this tone or accent, and in it alone, does the aesthetic personality consist. Naturally, this tone did not usually come into being all at once and once and for all, nor, once formed, did it remain unchanged until the artist's mortal frame breathed its last: the artist has been subject to influences that have facilitated, opposed or otherwise affected the formation of his aesthetic personality; nor, once formed, has this personality remained immutably the same, but has either been enriched and strengthened or has crumbled and disintegrated, and so on. Tracing the characteristics and history of the aesthetic personality is the task of art criticism. In this Crocean conception, it is evident that historical and genetic criticism does indeed outline the genesis and history of the work of art (or, more broadly, of the aesthetic personality), but – note well – *only within the sphere of the empirical, biographical personality of the individual artist*. Ultimately, only those elements extraneous to the artist's aesthetic personality fall under the jurisdiction of historical and genetic criticism; for what makes a work of art a work of art, and an aesthetic personality an aesthetic personality, is an ineffable quality that only taste can grasp, and which in itself has no connection whatsoever with history or time.

Naturally, Croce does not deny that the artist, living on earth and not on the moon, draws from the living fabric of the history that surrounds him elements which he transforms into

a work of art, and to understand it, one must therefore go back to those elements and thus to history: if one knew nothing of chivalry, what would one understand of Ariosto? If one knew nothing of the history of Florence, what would one understand of Dante? But it is clear that, in this conception, history *explains* the work of art in its raw and abstract material, *it* does not *condition* it: so much so that, according to Croce, there is nothing to prevent artists from flourishing at the same time—or rather, within the same historical and cultural wave—whose visions and experiences of the world have absolutely nothing in common. What makes Dante Dante is the tone with which he sang of his subject matter: and if, because of this, understood as raw material, he is part of history, it is precisely for that reason that he is entirely outside it. It is clear that, having emerged in the fourteenth century, one must turn to the history of that period to understand the *Divine Comedy*, but what makes the *Divine Comedy* is the *Divine Comedy* and not any old *Quadriregio* has nothing to do either with Dante's century or with the centuries preceding and following it. Thought through energetically and thoroughly, the internal logic of Croce's theory leads one to affirm that it is entirely conceivable that a Balzac and a Dostoevsky might, in Mycenaean Greece, write **The Human Comedy** and **Crime and Punishment** (I mean, of course, the spirit and not the plot or subject matter of their works) and, conversely, a Homer and a Pindar who, in our capitalist and bourgeois world, sing (here too, I mean the spirit and not the events sung) their immortal poems. To those who object that his aesthetics completely overlooks the existence of schools and

of artistic movements and denies the undeniable fact that a masterpiece is usually preceded by a series of attempts, of varying length, and imperfect visions that pave the way for the perfect vision. Croce replies that all this concerns the history of culture and not art criticism, whose role is to tell us whether a given work has succeeded or not and, if so, in which of its parts. But it is clear that, in this conception, the very history of the artist's aesthetic personality would have to fall outside the scope of art criticism and come under the history of culture, and that criticism in the strictest sense would have to be reduced to an index of the successful fragments or passages in a work or in an entire artistic output.

Conclusion: according to Benedetto Croce, no substantial and intimate relationship binds the work of art to its own time. As the product of an aesthetic personality, the work of art is outside its own time and of all times. One cannot write art history because, being outside time, art is outside history. Criticism must be content with scattered essays, with isolated monographs, each devoted to outlining the characteristics and genesis of an aesthetic personality. This is the reform of artistic and literary history that Croce proposes: a reform that would be better described as radical *destruction*, and through which he attempted to overcome what he calls the sociological conception of art history.

Nothing could be more opposed to Croce's theory than that set out in the preceding pages. According to this theory, artistic activity is realised as such insofar as it gives

form to a feeling, a taste, a flavour, an experience of Life which, if it has not yet taken form, means that it is formless, a fluid, living, mobile chaos not yet organised into thought and images. Now, what is the feeling of Life which, by definition, has not yet taken form, has not yet organised itself, but undulates chaotically and amorphously, without fixed boundaries? It is the present, current, contemporary feeling, and present, current, contemporary precisely because, and only because, it is in the process of becoming, of taking shape, of forming. It is through this formless state that the artist experiences within himself that he has his roots in his own time, and all the more so the more he steps out of his narrow empirical personality and sings for everyone. Of course, it is not enough to experience that formless state within oneself to be an artist; one must also shape it into form. But one is not an artist unless one experiences and elaborates that formless state, for artistic activity is an activity that gives form to the formless, and there is no other formless state than the new, present, actual feeling of life. This, being a specific feeling, taste and experience of life—which presupposes that specific past and prepares that specific future—is historically conditioned and, in turn, historically conditions the work of art. The work of art, therefore, insofar as it is the form into which that formless substance has settled, cannot be conceived of in any other time than that in which it arose.

Here, then, is Art re-immersed in History; here is Croce's iron barrier between Art and Life broken down; here, in contrast to Croce's aestheticising criticism, is the possibility restored

for criticism to take moral and vital values into account when judging a work of art and to re-establish among works of art those hierarchies of values that Croce denies – and which, from his point of view, he must logically deny – here is the possibility restored to criticism of taking into account the schools, movements and artistic trends, in short, everything that in the life of Art and of the individual artist constitutes development, process and evolution. A work of art is such only insofar as it is original, that is, an elaboration of a new sense of Life, new because it is present, contemporary and current. Novelty and originality are essential aspects of the work of art, and it is through them that the work enters into history. Historical or genetic criticism thus determines the meaning and value of the work of art, its universal significance in the history of the Spirit; aesthetic analysis tells us whether and to what extent that significance found artistic expression.

Such, in the form in which I am presenting it, is the theory of art as originality and of the artist as a child of his time. To make the artist a child of his time, it is not enough, therefore, to assert that by living in his time he draws upon certain elements of it (reduced to this, the theory would be a vulgar banality, which no one would dream of contesting); it is necessary to make time – understood as Life in action, that is, as the present, actuality, contemporaneity, originality – a formally necessary element of the work of art.

II.
GIOVANNI SARMENT AND THE NEW PROBLEMS OF THE THEATRE

1.[13]
Giovanni Sarment.

Giovanni Sarment is a very young actor at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, the famous avant-garde theatre in Paris. He is now twenty-five years old: he was twenty-three when his first play, **La corona di cartone** (performed at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre on 4 February 1920), brought him to the attention of the public and critics as one of the most promising talents in French theatre. *Il pescatore di ombre* (performed at the same theatre on 15 April 1921) firmly established the young playwright's burgeoning reputation and instantly brought him widespread fame here too. Beyond any apparent and superficial differences in subject matter, an intimate and organic link connects these two plays, for in both it is one and the same artistic problem that preoccupies and troubles Sarment, although, of course, in **The Shadow Fisherman** it is posed with greater awareness and, for that very reason, brought closer to its solution.

The Cardboard Crown and The Shadow Fisherman.

The following words by Stendhal serve as an epigraph to **La Corona di cartone**: 'I am regarded as a man of great wit and quite insensitive, astute even... I am have been

13 This first section reproduces a lecture delivered at the Teatro Argentina in Rome on 6 April 1922, preceding the matinee performance of **Il Pescatore di ombre** by Dario Niccodemi's company.

'madly in love'. From these words, the protagonist's inner turmoil is wonderfully brought to life. He is a young prince who, fleeing the oppressive boredom of a court where he has lived without love or joy, ventures out into the world under a false name, a man among men. Shy and sensitive, even sentimental, he hides his shyness and sensitivity behind a mask of a haughty and cold man, imposing and hard, at times cynical and *a joker*, always somewhat detached from those with whom he lives and from the very things he says, which he does not seem to take too seriously. Beneath this mask, a young actress, Mary, gets to know him and feels drawn to him by a deep affection: but when one night, beneath the cold silence of the stars, he casts aside his mask and reveals himself to her as he truly is—sensitive and passionate—the girl turns away from him. This decision shapes the course of his life. A few hours earlier, news had reached him that his father, the king, had died. And he, who would have renounced the unwanted throne had Mary only wished it, sadly sets off once more for his homeland. A few years pass. Mary arrives in the capital of the kingdom, having become a great actress. The king sees her again. But in the presence of that stern, melancholic, grave man, who speaks to her tenderly of his great passion of old, Mary feels nothing but embarrassment, boredom and even a slight secret urge to laugh. But when the king, who has now understood her and realised the mistake of the past, dons his ironic and cynical mask, Mary, astonished and shaken, is ready to throw herself into his arms:

only in this way does she like him, only in this way is she ready to love him. Then the king rejects her: Mary does not love him; she loves a rival far inferior to him, at whom he can only smile—a rival who is himself, in a fictitious and superficial form of his being, a mock king with a red cloak and a cardboard crown on his head, like a melodramatic tenor. In this work, the drama lies entirely in the impossibility for a man to be loved for what, beyond the superficial self—constructed by will and sustained by effort—is his true and profound self: it lies in the mutual incomprehension and impenetrability of souls, which yet believe they understand and penetrate one another completely. This, precisely, is the dramatic crux of **The Shadow Fisherman**, in which, as in *The Cardboard Crown*, the central and germinal core of the drama lies in the creatures' radical incomprehension, in their inability to discern, beneath the mask that conceals them, the genuine features of the face of flesh and blood.

Sarment's central problem

Now, what is original, new, and truly relevant to our present day in this dramatic conception is not the dramatic contrast between the mask and the face – a contrast that pervades the whole of Romantic literature and of which, to stay close to home, one of the most recent and successful stage portrayals is Bataille's *Poliche*. *Poliche* too, remember, is a sensitive, sentimental, melancholic soul, who, in order to keep close to him the woman whom

, is forced to don the mask of a frivolous and cynical *bon vivant*. What interests and fascinates us in these plays by Sarment—though, to tell the truth, they are more in a state of nascent attempt than of full and complete realisation—is the dominant and central position held by the dualism of the deep self and the superficial self; it is the new meaning that this dualism assumes, or begins to assume; and it is the new consequences to which, when rigorously applied, it necessarily leads.

Sarment and avant-garde theatre.

All this will become even clearer if we cease to view the author of these two plays in isolation and instead accord him his rightful place within the vast and powerful wave of theatrical renewal currently sweeping across Europe, a movement in which the playwrights proceed entirely independently of one another, or, at least, without deep and substantial direct dependencies, as if driven by the same wave, thus providing new and admirable proof of that spiritual synchronism which is, at once, the most evident effect and symptom of the profound and substantial unity of a culture. That, in fact, the same spiritual problem, albeit in different forms and guises, albeit with varying degrees of rigour and self-awareness, should emerge simultaneously in many thinkers or artists, differing in language and race, and in each independently, or without substantial interdependence, of the other, is the best proof that this problem is posed not by the whim and caprice of the individual artist and

thinker, but by the very necessity of the times: it is as if the same collective soul were thinking and pressing upon them all. Now, what is the problem at the solution of which, independently of one another, have worked or are working in France Sarment and Crommelynck, in Russia Andreieff, in Germany the Expressionists, in Italy the authors of *the grotesque*, Rosso di San Secondo, Martini, Pirandello and, to a greater or lesser extent, almost all those who write about theatre today, and which now – judging by some recent news from over there – is beginning to emerge in England as well? It is not easy to outline, even in provisional and summary terms, the direction of the movement in which all these artists and thinkers are moving; it is not straightforward to encapsulate it in a formula or equation that does not, at the same time, do injustice to the individual differences that exist—and which are numerous and marked. Nevertheless, I shall attempt to do so with the greatest possible clarity and brevity.

The defining issue of the nineteenth century.

What, to my mind, distinguishes the writers of the generation I am discussing here from those of the previous generation is their shared fundamental attitude towards reality and life. Every artist worthy of the name, and likewise every great and organic artistic movement, has its own fundamental attitude towards reality and life. Every artist worthy of the name, and likewise every great and organic artistic movement, resolves in its own way the mystery of existence, provides an answer to the enigma of the world and of life, perhaps by replying that there is no

answer. Browse through the vast dramatic literature of the last century: the question it implicitly strives to answer is, at heart, but one: what is the value, the meaning, the true direction of life? The great playwrights of the last century are true creators and heralds of vital and moral values: but since in the last century the dominant problem in thought is the moral problem, I have no hesitation in asserting that in a history of nineteenth-century philosophy one ought to make ample room for them, expelling many who were not philosophers but merely professors of philosophy, which is, alas, quite a different matter. The relationship between happiness and duty, between the former and the latter passion, between passion and reason, between science and faith, between the individual and the family or society or the State, between freedom and authority, between free will and the influence of the environment, between conservation and revolution, and countless others: these are the problems over which the great playwrights of the last century wrestle. Suppose all the books of the last century were destroyed, with the sole exception of plays: these alone would suffice to reconstruct, with complete certainty, the fundamental outlines of the history of the spiritual interests and problems of the nineteenth century. But beyond the problem of the meaning and value of life, there is another, even more fundamental one: namely, whether, in general, life has meaning and value, or whether it is rather the Shakespearean 'tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. This problem too is posed and

resolved in various ways by the playwrights of the last century: in an optimistic or pessimistic sense, or, somewhere between the two, a melioristic one. What, then, is the new attitude common to the very latest playwrights, and what is it that makes them original and profoundly relevant? In my opinion, this.

This is the pressing issue of our time.

Before them, the question had been asked whether reality had any meaning or value, and, if it did, what that was and where it lay. In these writers, another, very different and far more radical problem begins to arise and impose itself as the dominant issue: what is it that leads us to think, believe and judge that what we believe to be reality is reality; what is it that makes reality real; what is it that defines it, characterises it and establishes it as reality. And since the concept of reality is a relational concept—that is, a concept that can only be conceived insofar as it stands in relation to an opposite concept, that of unreality—the central problem of European theatre, the one of which all others are but subordinate moments or aspects and into which all converge and are resolved, is this today: what is it that distinguishes reality from dreams, from fiction, from fantasy, from illusion? What is it that makes reality reality and fantasy fantasy? Think about it carefully, look deeply at what, through their more or less successful works, the new playwrights wish to convey – sometimes without even being clearly and precisely aware of it – and you will find that the problem that

preoccupies them to the point of becoming, for some, as haunting as a nightmare is precisely this: where do the boundaries of reality end and those of dreams begin, and, generally speaking, is there a dividing line between dream and reality?

Reality and illusion

In the romantic conception of the relationship between dream and reality, reality stands on one side – raw, heavy, massive, with precise and well-defined boundaries – whilst, in contrast and above it, lies the misty, ethereal realm of the dream, fading into infinity. The relationship between the two is one of clear and precise diametric opposition. In the current formulation of the problem, that relationship is turned on its head: it is the dream itself that appears as reality, and the differences between the two are merely a matter of degree. As Miguel de Unamuno says in the novel *Nebbia*, where he too posed the same problem: 'The dream of one person is illusion, appearance; the dream of two is already truth, reality. What is the real world if not the dream of all, the common dream?' Reality, which was once a rigid, homogeneous, heavy, compact block, thus breaks down into infinite different planes, all equally real, albeit of a reality distinct from one another, and in perpetual motion and exchange of positions amongst themselves: a flight of clouds beneath a stormy sky. I could not better characterise the difference between the dramatic problem of the last century and the present problem—our own—than by saying that the former was a moral problem and the latter a gnoseological one. What is truth, what is error? What is

reality, what is illusion? What is real existence, what is fantasy? There, formulated in all their rigour, are the questions to which European theatre today strives to answer. And to answer which a profound transformation of dramatic technique has become necessary. This is the reason for those many extravagances and oddities that you have seen running rampant on our stages for some years: reprehensible extravagances, certainly, in that they did not solve the problem they claimed to solve, nor did they even pose it correctly, but important in that they bore witness to the shifting of the dramatic problem. But transformations do exist, and they are more intense and profound than those purely mechanical and superficial ones that are surely present in everyone's memory. The need not to abuse your patience compels me to be brief. But I would at least like to touch briefly upon some of those transformations: the disappearance, for example, from the stage of *the character* in the traditional sense of the word.

The disappearance of the character.

In the traditional sense of the word, character is that which is identical and permanent within each of us, and which manifests itself as such through the flow of events; taken to its extreme, character becomes a type, representative of an entire category of individuals. But types and characters are conceivable only as long as one believes in something fixed, rigid and permanent that exists outside and independently of us: once the axe of

doubt to the very roots of reality, once reality has been toppled from the unshakeable foundation upon which common sense had placed it and cast into the river of universal becoming, once everything that seems permanent, rigid and fixed has been reduced to a precarious and provisional construct, there is no longer any place on the stage for types or characters as they were once understood; and if any writer today labours to present them to us, he seems to us to be lingering over old and outdated problems, and cuts a somewhat ridiculous figure, like those provincial priests who spend their spare moments writing an epic poem in twenty-four cantos.

Individuals and their communication.

The individual ceases to be an entity with rigid, well-defined boundaries: he appears as a medley of varied and contrasting personalities, which overlap, merge, repel and harmonise with one another. More true than ever are the words of the ancient Heraclitus: 'whichever direction you go, you will not find the boundaries of the soul'. – Where does the true personality end and the false ones begin? And, generally speaking, is there a true personality, or are they all true and false in their own way? And if this is so, if every individual is composite like the chimera, if they are a world of personalities in constant exchange and flux, how can such volatilised, mobilised and fluid individuals understand one another, how can they communicate with one another? And here, at the centre of interest , the dramatic issue today is posed :

problem of mutual understanding, of the mutual intelligence of individuals. View **The Shadow Fisherman** from this perspective, and it will take on a new and broader meaning for you. It ceases to be the romantic drama that it may appear to be at first, superficial glance, and is illuminated with profound and universal significance. Giovanni's drama lies in his inability to penetrate beyond Nelly's superficial and apparent self to her deep and real self; his spirit has remained attached to the Nelly he first met and cannot comprehend that Nelly could have changed. He does understand it, yes, whilst he is mad: once he has regained his reason, he no longer understands it. Whilst he is mad, Giovanni's spirit docilely follows the Heraclitean flow of life: dissolving into life, it sways and floats with it; once he has regained his reason, it stiffens into a representation of itself and, for that very reason, breaks.

The plays of personality and the new dramatic technique.

Drama no longer comes upon the personality from without, provoked by an external event which, as such, may or may not exist, but is inherent in its very nature. It is dramatic at its core. In Italy, the focus of new playwrights has centred above all on the struggle between the spontaneity of the vital current that flows silently and obscurely in the subterranean depths of the soul and the conscious or unconscious constructs and fictions into which men strive, and

they are inevitably compelled to strive to stem the tide. In France, under the influence of Ibsen and De Curel, she was more drawn to drama arising from the multiplicity of personalities that a person harbours within themselves and from the inevitable friction caused by the social interaction of these personalities, each of which, as it develops, tends to deprive the others of breathing space. Under the impetus of a more acute and profound observation, the narrow confines of the traditional concept of personality have been blown apart, and the immense complexity of inner life has come to light. Having abandoned the old dramatic technique—suitable for a psychology that turned a blind eye to everything that was not psychologically clear and distinct, reflected and conscious—the new theatre attempts to bring inner life to the stage in all its fleeting, shadowy, silent, fluid multiplicity. Drawing inspiration from Maeterlinck and Bergson, the *Compagnons de la Chimère*, of which Sarment is a member, bring to the stage the verbally unexpressed, the unconscious, the indistinct and evanescent aspects of inner life; they restore the silences no less eloquent than words, the silences in which, beyond the word that spatialises, separates, stiffens and kills, souls touch one another in the deep, dark realm of being, from whence warmth and life flow to the superficial, luminous surface.

The dramas of thought.

Whereas previously playwrights drew their

subjects from the contrasts of feelings, from the conflicts of passions and interests, in a word from the unfolding of emotional and moral life, today it is the contrasts, the conflicts and the unfolding of thinking thought that provide the material for the new theatre. Earlier playwrights, of course, also set ideas against one another and make them clash and fight amongst themselves. But it is ideas, in the plural, that clash and fight: in and of itself, each idea stands outside the struggle and the combat. Playwrights have no eye for the drama that each idea, taken in and of itself, carries within it, and of which it is pregnant like a storm cloud with lightning. But the true protagonist of the new theatre is Thought, the *King of Thought* whom Edgar Allan Poe saw seated, crowned, upon a throne of sorrow in an enchanted palace; the new playwrights strive to bring to the stage the struggles, torments, conflicts and dramas of which is woven the infinite creative activity with which Thought creates itself and, through itself, the world. Art, despite all appearances to the contrary, is profoundly intellectual: intellectual and dramatic at the same time, for Thought is no longer the dead mirror that passively reflects an external reality indifferent to it; it is the suffering creator of the world, whose tireless activity must necessarily manifest itself through constant and unceasing contrasts, oppositions and lacerations.

The new intuition of the world is the theatre.

Thus, without meaning to, and perhaps without even being fully aware of it, the new playwrights bring to the

This insight into life, which has triumphantly established itself in all other realms of the spirit, is further proof of that spiritual synchronicity, of that profound and fundamental unity of cultures, of which I spoke to you at the outset. The modern soul denies that there is a real world of things and people existing in and of itself, outside and prior to the spirit that perceives it; for it, the world is a dream, a mirage, a phenomenon, an appearance of our spirit; the universe is for each person what it appears to be to that person. The modern soul denies that there are immutable and ever-identical things and conceives of life as an unceasing flow, as an eternal becoming in which there is no place for entities, internal or external, things or *characters*, that are rigid and have precise boundaries. The modern soul abolishes the boundary between error and truth, between fiction and reality: fiction and reality, error and truth are temporary banks marked out from time to time along the eternal river of life, which renews itself from moment to moment, moment by moment surpassing the positions reached, dissolving and rendering fluid the rigid terms set by the intellect. Today, truly, Life can say of itself the words that, through the guise of flame, Faust heard spoken from the mouth of the Spirit of the Earth:

> In the fervent
> currents of life, In the
> infinite
> Storm of events, I rise
> and sink, I breathe
> here and there!
> Birth and death; a sea

Without shore or
bottom, An eternal
change, A living that
rest
Never had, nor ever shall.

This insight into the world and into life is brought to the stage by the new playwrights, some with greater, some with lesser awareness and depth, some with greater, some with lesser vigour and imaginative freshness. Thanks to them, the theatre—which had been slumbering on psychologically outdated premises, rehashing problems that were now dead and irrelevant—has been whipped by the wind of new ideas and run through with the thrill of new problems. The masterpieces of the past shine with an eternal light: but life has now moved on. New problems demand solutions, and they are our problems, posed by our present-day lives.

Conclusion.

Let us hope that, just as the problems of the past found their brilliant Oedipuses in the great artists of the past, so too shall ours, and that our descendants are not too far inferior to our forebears. Today, we march in the twilight towards a goal barely glimpsed. Everything is today uncertain, approximate, provisional, and first and foremost the very nature of the problems themselves. The genius who will utter the magic word of revelation will illuminate with dazzling light the very problem he will solve; he will give us both the rigorous formulation of the problem and its solution. Today we see

through a glass darkly. Then we shall see face to face, and all shall be revealed.

2.

The *Shadow Fisherman* is Giovanni, a young poet who had the brightest future ahead of him and whose every ambition seemed within reach, when, to some extent, his dissolute lifestyle and, above all, a violent and intense unrequited passion for Nelly drove him mad: a sweet, harmless madness, aware of its own nature, a near-total shipwreck of all memory, upon which barely a few shapeless wrecks of the past remained. Giovanni lives in the countryside with his mother and his brother Renato, an architect for whom life has not been kind; betrayed by his wife, he is separated from her and spends his days in joyless work. Giovanni's only amusement is fishing for ombrine, but those fish are so wary that they won't take the bait and dart away, swift as arrows: a delicate and transparent symbol (of purely Ibsenian origin), based on the double meaning of the word *ombres*, which in French means both ombrine and shadows. And just as with fishing for ombrine, so too with fishing for shadows Giovanni has no luck: not a single shadow from his past takes the bait dangling from the hook of memory.

Having discovered in his ill-fated passion the secret of her son's madness, his mother makes a last-ditch attempt to cure him: she turns to Nelly and begs her to come and spend a few days with her, in the hope that her presence will restore

. The request is granted. And Giovanni recognises Nelly; he sees her again with warmth and pleasure, but the expected and hoped-for jolt—which, in his relatives' plans, was supposed to bring him back to his senses—does not occur. But what the first meeting fails to achieve is instead brought about by constant, friendly closeness. When Nelly first set foot in Giovanni's house, nothing filled her young heart: with a dry and empty soul, she felt as old as the world itself. She had gone to Giovanni's to perform an act of charity. She had not loved him before because he was suspicious and gloomy, irritable and unjust; she now finds him quite different: kind and cheerful, intelligent and perceptive, able to see beyond the deceptive veil of words and ready to grasp the true stirrings of her soul from a gesture, a glance, a fleeting, sparkling smile. And she falls in love with him. Joyfully, the two young people decide to marry as soon as Giovanni has recovered, which, Giovanni assures her, cannot now be too long in coming. 'A game,' exclaims Renato, catching them in an embrace, 'a game, isn't it?' And Nelly, somewhat confused and intimidated—Nelly, who has realised that Renato too loves her ardently—dares not reply that it is no game, but a serious matter, a very serious one.

Thus the event has occurred from which the dramatic clash will spring. Let us pause for a moment to consider this moment in the drama's development, which is truly decisive for the judgement to be passed upon it. Nelly has fallen in love with Giovanni. But in Giovanni, Nelly loves not the Giovanni of before—suspicious, irritable, incapable of

understand, beyond the literal meaning of her words, what she truly meant: she loves a Giovanni who is quite the opposite, radically transformed for the better by his sweet madness. Seeing Giovanni in this light has brought about an equally profound transformation in Nelly: she is no longer the cold, haughty, disdainful girl whom Giovanni knew and loved; love has made her a young woman full of sweetness, grace and grateful kindness. What brought about this radical change in Nelly? Giovanni's madness: a madness that made him singularly perceptive, which, by destroying the false and superficial self within him created by jealousy, self-love, and the prick of wounded pride, a mask that was not his face, yet which had become encrusted upon his face, deforming and concealing it, bringing his true features to light, so that love, in turn, is kindled in the soul of his beloved. The internal logic of the drama therefore imperiously demands that Giovanni's return to reason must once again turn the situation on its head. Returning to his senses, Giovanni will return to himself, to the self he was before: he will once again become gloomy, suspicious, irritable, unintelligent; he will be astonished to find, in place of the Nelly he knew and loved, a Nelly who is entirely different and opposite, whom he neither knows nor can love.

This, in my view, is the only logical line of development for the drama. Which, in this way, would itself have given artistic form to the singular and profound torment of our thoroughly relativistic age: to the

the contradiction it perceives between Life and Representation, between Life, which rushes on in its overpowering and savage fury, shattering all the patterns of representation once it has made use of them, and Representation, which, having once fixed and expressed it, claims to be adequate to it for all eternity and to immobilise it within its own immobility. This is the vital core of Luigi Pirandello's artistic world, a core that our brilliant Sicilian is bringing to light ever more deeply and boldly. With a victorious and powerful surge, the very young Sarment had placed himself at the very heart of this artistic problem, truly *contemporary*, truly *our own*: with the added advantage over Pirandello of having drawn this drama of universal significance from a plot as banal, humble and everyday as possible, whereas Pirandello – and this is the greatest flaw in many of his dramatic constructions – feels the need to erect a convoluted edifice of events, *thereby* undermining the universal significance of the drama. In Sarment's drama, as I see it—not as the author wrote it—madness, by making Giovanni clairvoyant, grants him happiness: that happiness which reason, incapable of penetrating life's secrets, foolishly fixates upon life's surface, first denies him, and denies him again after Giovanni has regained it. From the humble, banal, everyday interweaving of events would have leapt out, with admirable clarity, the defeat of abstract, immobile, superficial reason, incapable of following life in

its eternal flow.

But Sarment has written another play, far less interesting and original. The sudden jolt of a memory sparks a flash in Giovanni's dead world of recollections, and this suddenly revives in his memory. He comes to his senses, groans that everything is starting over as before, and sees in Nelly—now that the game is over, the pitiful farce of love concluded—the Nelly of before. But no: Nelly tells him that everything has changed, that she is quite different, that this time it is for real because she truly loves him. And Giovanni, believing her, embraces her happily: Nelly, just as he now finds her radically transformed by love, he loves her. The return to reason has not destroyed the happiness created by madness. Intelligence, docile, has followed life in its Heraclitean flow. And the drama goes up in smoke.

The drama comes, but from outside: *eo ipso*, it has no universal value. Renato loves Nelly too, and so he welcomes Giovanni's return to reason with great reluctance. Giovanni realises this, grasps the cause, and throws it in his face with violence. Renato confesses: yes, he loves Nelly, but Giovanni must not delude himself that Nelly loves him; it is out of pity that Nelly pretends to love him; indeed, if he really wants to know the truth, the one he loves is not Nelly, but another girl who resembles her and whom her mother has substituted for the real Nelly in an attempt to bring him to his senses. Is it possible that the real Nelly, who did not love him when he was well, loves him now that he is defeated and ill? And Giovanni is convinced; yes, that is how it is; the Nelly who says she loves him is another

Nelly, who looks like the first one, but is not her.

It is the same drama as before, of course, but rendered external and contingent, and thus stripped of its deepest essence as a drama. It is the drama of the external clash of two passions, not the *actual* drama – which only our soul could pose and experience – of Life and Intelligence, springing from within the soul. But even when externalised, and thus devalued in this way, the drama fails once again, because it is not resolutely carried through to its conclusion. The author lacks the courage to burden Renato with the full, terrifying weight of the horrible lie, and strives to find every possible mitigating factor for him: Renato lies so horribly only because he believes that Giovanni is not yet fully recovered and that Nelly does not truly love Giovanni, but only for fun and out of pity. Diminished and trivialised, the focus of the action shifts to Renato: but where is Renato? More than a flesh-and-blood character, he is an evanescent, bloodless phantom, utterly incapable of such terribly energetic initiatives as those the author attributes to him.

But the nostalgia for the first failed drama haunts Sarment and gives him no rest. In the fourth act, he returns to it surreptitiously and attempts to pick up the broken thread. Giovanni sees Nelly again and tells her that she is not Nelly. The real Nelly was haughty, scornful, proud; the one standing before him is humble, sweet, loving: therefore, it is not her. Nelly ends up murmuring: 'Yes, it is not me.' Giovanni leaves. Renato arrives. He

openly declares his love to Nelly. Nelly sadly rejects him: she loves Giovanni. 'Truly, and not just for fun?' asks Renato. 'Truly!' replies Nelly. 'What have I done!' replies Renato. And he runs to save Giovanni. Too late: Giovanni has mortally wounded himself. Dying, he asks if the woman before him is the real Nelly. His mother, Renato, and Nelly herself, in despair, tell him yes. But Giovanni still believes it is a merciful lie, a final deception, and takes with him into eternal darkness the bitterness of disillusionment.

In this act, the author's vacillation between the two dramatic developments that clash in his mind—and, in clashing, cancel each other out—is truly distressing. The drama of the two Nellys is nullified by the fact that in the third act Giovanni believed the two Nellys to be one and the same, a belief shaken in him only by his brother's external revelation—a revelation that might well not have occurred, for Renato might well not have fallen in love with Nelly—a revelation without which Giovanni would have married Nelly and lived happily with her: in the fourth act, we have the drama of the two Nellys as two separate people rather than one, and this drama would vanish if Nelly were to make herself truly recognised, reminding Giovanni of something, for example, that only the two of them could know. Renato's drama is then nullified by his *repentance* once he recognises his *mistake*. Giovanni kills himself: he might just as well not have killed himself and married Nelly. The tragic ending is not in the logic intima of the work. The ruin comes

from outside. Salvation could have come from outside, with no less right.

I wished to examine this drama, which has come to us from France, with particular attention, both for the importance of the endeavour it represents – even if not perfectly realised – and for the exquisite and somewhat gentle subtlety with which it is conducted. Rarely has one seen such a total renunciation of theatrical effects, even where they were easy and certain to achieve: the drama proceeds with absolute simplicity, from which, by the very force of things, a tragic atmosphere rises that envelops the characters. Even the touch of symbolism present in the work is transparent and delicate, and fits naturally into the drama, becoming one with the action. Symbolism of purely Ibsenian origin, just as Ibsenian are the stark, linear simplicity of the play, the contrast between reality and dream that pervades it from the very first scenes, and the softly lyrical atmosphere that envelops the characters and hints at something grand and solemn that lies beyond their words and outward gestures.

3.[14]

'I shall go away; I shall return anonymously among decent folk, and I shall settle down for ever and for all time. This, of all my ideas, will have been the most Hamlet-like.'
It is likely that these words by Jules Laforgue in **Hamlet* ou *Les Suites de la piété filiale** inspired Jean Sarment – a scholar and admirer of Laforgue – to write **The Marriage of Hamlet**, a drama in three acts and a prologue, which was performed at the Odéon in Paris on 10 November 1922.
Polonius, Ophelia and Hamlet have been waiting at the gates of the Supreme Court for seventeen years to be judged by God. Whilst waiting, they talk of their past lives. 'Ah, if only we could do it all over again!' 'If only we knew what we know now.' And they make retrospective plans: to escape complications, to forget who they were, to be simple, to live in isolation and tranquillity. 'To be your wife. To prepare lunch and bring up our children,' says Ophelia. 'No longer to mingle with the great ones of the world and their affairs,' says Polonius. 'To forget that my father was king,' says Hamlet. And God the Father, who too has his moments of mischief, decides, in an act of terrible kindness, to give them their lives back: let them pick up where they left off, at the same age, but knowing what they now know. And here are the three characters on earth, in a small house, on the edge of a wood, in Denmark.
Back on earth, Polonius adapts perfectly to

14 Addition to the[2nd]edition.

new existence: he forges bonds with the neighbours, courts the maid, and if from the height of a professorial chair he could administer justice and hand down verdicts, he would have nothing more to desire. Ophelia is to marry Hamlet in ten days' time: she has become a wise and well-mannered woman, a shrewd and prudent *housewife*; she refuses Hamlet's marital advances and would never throw herself into the water for him, under any circumstances. She, too, feels perfectly at home.

The only one who cannot forget his former destiny is Hamlet; he is repulsed by the stifling, flat, bourgeois normality to which the other two have adapted so wonderfully, and he longs for the great role that fate had assigned him to play in his previous existence: a terrible part to bear, but one which, nonetheless, filled his life. On their wedding night, the neighbours to whom he has told his story and who believe him to be mad play a trick on him: one of them disguises himself as a ghost and tells him he is the shadow of his grandfather, whom his father, the king, murdered. And Hamlet, gullible because he wants to believe, because he needs to believe in order not to feel himself dying, abandons his bride and flees to Elsinore to carry out his vengeance. He returns some time later, a weary, ragged beggar. He has not overthrown the king from his throne, nor has he even seen him: he has learnt that he is not the son of the King of Denmark, but of a common stable-boy. And the tragedy enters a new phase.

In the first phase, which unfolds in the first two acts, it is the tragedy of Hamlet who, crushed by the mediocrity of a fate he has freely accepted

and desired, feels a distaste for the banal happiness that awaits him and a longing for the great role he played in his former life. A struggle between two personalities: a fictitious, artificial, bourgeois personality and a profound, intense, romantic personality which, oppressed by the former, works to remove it and emerge into the light, and ultimately succeeds. In the second and more tragic phase, it is the tragedy of a being who no longer knows what he truly is: whether a king or a stable boy. The situation is remarkably similar to that of Lorenzo, Duke of Spadaro, in Leonida Andreieff's **The Black Masks**: could Sarment have been aware of this?

And throughout the third act, we witness Hamlet's efforts to resolve the truly Hamlet-like dilemma of his personality. Convinced that he is the son of a stable-boy, he attempts to construct a suitable psychological identity for himself: he confesses to Polonius and Ophelia the lowliness of his origins, endures their crude insults with resignation, and when Polonius offers him the post of swineherd, he humbly accepts the menial task. But whilst Ophelia, Polonius's daughter, hates and despises him, Polonius's maid, who is also named Ophelia, loves him: she loved him when he posed as a king, she loves him now that he is a beggar; she called him 'Sir' when he claimed to be a prince of royal blood, she calls him 'Sir' now that he is nothing more than a swineherd. Such love and devotion restore Hamlet's self-confidence, and when he catches Polonius attempting to abuse the girl, he strangles him. The neighbours, who now regard him as a dangerous madman, stone him

along with Ophelia the maid, and Hamlet spends his final moments trying to prove to himself that what he has done and is now doing is the deed of a king and not of a stable-boy, and that therefore the legend of his origins is false.

The tragedy of a soul that is not quite sure of its own existence or of what it is; the tragedy of personalities in conflict with one another, without one ever knowing precisely where the true ends and the false and artificial begins. The problem that preoccupies Jean Sarment in **Hamlet's Marriage** is therefore the same as that which concerned him in **The Cardboard Crown** and **The Shadow Fisherman**: only here he has gained a clearer awareness of the peculiarity of his terms. Admittedly, in terms of artistic perfection, *The Marriage of Hamlet* falls short of the two works that brought fame to the young playwright. There is something abstract, dry and frail about its construction. The contrast between the pair of Hamlet and Ophelia the maid on the one hand, and the pair of Ophelia (Polonius's daughter) and Polonius on the other, is too stark and sharp. The only character in the play who possesses life and movement is Hamlet. But whilst Hamlet's anxieties and longings in the first phase of the tragedy are portrayed with psychological subtlety and exquisite poetic sensibility, in the third act—which ought to be the most tragic and Hamlet-like of all— Sarment succumbs to the temptation to employ heavy-handed irony and gives the action a character that is somewhere between the grotesque and the puppet-like, which clashes with the delicate lyrical atmosphere that pervades the work.

A drama, despite its flaws, boldly conceived and nobly executed, written, in its finest moments, in a

clear and luminous language, rich in subtle and profound observations, all vibrating with sensitivity and modern anxiety: a tragedy of to be or not to be, not in another life, but in this one here below, indifferent mist, chaotic fluidity, magma without clear boundaries, where the lines between dream and reality, between truth and falsehood, between the given and the constructed, flow, sway and merge.

III.
THE THEATRE
BY FERNAND CROMMELYNCK

The problem of the relationship and mutual communication between individuals is the central problem of Jean Sarment's theatre. It is also central to Fernand Crommelynck's theatre, which for this reason has every right to be included in the very modern theatre as I conceive it.

Fernand Crommelynck's dramatic output has, to date, consisted entirely of three three-act plays: **Le sculpteur de masques**, performed on 12 February 1911; *Le cocu magnifique*, performed on 14 December 1920; and *Les amants puerils*, performed on 14 March 1921. I have not been able to view Le *sculpteur de masques*, and so my analysis will be limited to Crommelynck's last two works, and above all to *Le cocu magnifique*, which firmly established his emerging reputation as a brilliant playwright.

1.

At the heart of *Les amants puerils* lies the profound, desolate and anguished sense of the individual's infinite solitude. 'Alas! How lonely a being is, in his solitude!', laments one of the characters in this sprawling, indecisive, strange and tormented drama. On earth, individuals come and go, meet, accompany one another and unite for a time, but, deep down, they always remain strangers to one another, unable to communicate. Not even the most radiant and ardent love is enough to forge a deep and lasting bond between them. Elisabetta, Princess of Groulingen, and Baron Cazou, in their youth, lived a love that made them almost legendary throughout the world. Wherever they went, people flocked to them, shouting their names; to strangers, the traces of their passage were proudly shown. Why had they deserved such glory? They were beautiful and loved one another more than anything in the world. The years pass. The two part ways. Then they meet in a hotel on the Flemish coast: Cazou, broken, slumped, forgetful, a pitiful and wretched wreck of a man; Elizabeth, striving by every means to hold on to a twilight of beauty that is plummeting towards the night of impending old age. They meet and do not recognise each other. Hearing her name spoken, the princess eventually recognises her Federico in that human wreck, but no memory of her lingers in the weary mind of the glorious lover of her youth. Cazou is alone

in the world: 'he has nothing left, nothing of his own but his shadow on the ground... Here, here, shadow of me, faithful dog! To the right, to the left, turn, jump, run, go, black Medoro...'.
In contrast to the night, the dawn: in contrast to lovers who meet again and no longer recognise one another, there are those who meet and fall in love for the first time – the *childish lovers*, Walter and Maria Enrichetta. But even over this budding love, the nightmare of the inevitable final separation casts its cold, dense shadow. Walter is so obsessed by it that he wants to die with Maria Enrichetta: united in death, they will never be separated again. But as they plunge into the water, the *childish lovers'* attempts to cling to one another come to nothing: death, which was meant to unite them, violently tears them apart. 'They struggled at the bottom, scraping their skin, biting one another as they died. They no longer loved one another.' Neither death nor love has the power to tear the creature away from the terrifying solitude of his individual self. It is the same theme that gives rise to the melancholic beauty of certain passages – the only truly beautiful ones – in Henri Barbusse's **Enfer**: buried in our bodies as in shrouds, our eyes mingled their tears whilst our hearts wept all alone; I saw you, fragile, infinite and profound; you wept... I felt that each of us is a world[15] .
But this motif, which has been isolated here and brought into full light, is far from being the dominant and central theme of the drama. Indeed, it remains in the background and

15 See the essay on Enrico Barbusse in *Voci del tempo*.

in the shadows, implied rather than stated, mingled rather than fused with inferior romantic motifs, to which the author gives primacy. And yet it is precisely to this that this poorly composed and ill-balanced drama—all vague and sluggish moods, in which the various moments fail to coalesce into an organic and vital unity, where inessential details drown out the dominant themes and a tiresome rhetorical emphasis alternates with flashes of acute and piercing sensitivity—owes its strange and painful flavour.

2.

In **Le Cocu magnifique**, on the contrary, that motif appears in all its force. But, even here, one must know how to find and see it. To those whose eye is fixed solely on the external and superficial events and the immediate meaning of the work, this can only appear as an extravagant farce, in which, given a grotesquely mad premise, one sees the consequences unfold with a thread of logic into a dizzying whirl of burlesque truth, a brilliant application of the logic of the absurd and of madness. But beneath this apparent absurdity and madness lies an intuition of life which, even if the author was not fully conscious of it, dominates and governs him, and which is neither mad nor absurd, but finds full resonance in the contemporary soul and thought.

The play is set in Flanders: a name that conjures up a setting perfectly suited to Crommelynck's style, in which a light, ethereal lyricism alternates with flashes of raw and fierce realism. The hero of the farce is a public scribe, Bruno, whose clientele consists mainly of young lovers. But Bruno is not a scribe like the others; indeed, strictly speaking, he is not even a scribe: it is Estrugo who writes; he dictates as Love breathes within him. For Bruno is a poet, a lyricist, transfiguring with the magic of art the humble material his clients provide him with. With a few strokes of genius, Crommelynck transports us to a

landscape that is both realistic and unreal, a Flemish landscape of the sort seen in children's books or on cheap tapestries: dotted with windmills, populated by peasants in thick clogs; a landscape straight out of a fairy tale or a puppet theatre, which the tragedy about to unfold within it envelops in its fairy-tale and puppet-like atmosphere, detaching it from the plane of everyday, bourgeois reality and lifting it above it.

Bruno is madly in love with his wife Stella; her slender, muscular teenage body is for him the object of an adoration in which nothing sensual is mixed, a purely aesthetic adoration, of which—and this is in the logic of a purely aesthetic adoration—he, a modern-day Candaules, wishes to make as many people as possible aware and a part of it, which he wants to universalise as much as he possibly can. The whole village therefore knows, down to the most intimate details, of Stella's beauty. But this is not enough for Bruno. One day Petrus, Stella's cousin, returning after many years' absence from a voyage across distant seas, comes to visit the couple. In the frenzy that grips him, Bruno orders Stella to show herself naked to Petrus so that he might judge whether he has lied or exaggerated. And Stella obeys: Stella, a creature of pure grace and innocence, immersed in her love like a bird in the air. But in Petrus's eyes a dark flame of sensual desire is kindled: that flame is, for Bruno, the revelation that his wife may be the object not only of purely aesthetic

, and therefore disinterested, but also of carnal appetite. That dark blaze in Petrus's eyes kills the statue of Stella within Bruno and reveals to him the woman, the wife, desirable, and therefore corruptible, by others. And the exhibitor of Stella's beauties plunges headlong into the most frenzied jealousy.

Having shifted his perspective from which he views that adored body—from an object of aesthetic and disinterested admiration, for which there are never enough admirers, to an object of exclusive desire for possession—he is overcome by despair at ever being able to have her wholly and solely for himself. There is no absolute certainty that Stella is wholly and solely his, body and soul; there cannot be: the opposite is therefore certain. Bruno is a cuckold, certainly. By whose hand? If there is any doubt, it lies solely in this. The transition from absolute confidence, from the unconscious and carefree certainty of a happy love, to the absolute certainty of betrayal is a matter of an instant: for in this instant the perspective from which Bruno viewed Stella and the world has turned itself upside down. His life splits into two distinct parts: and in each, Bruno's actions are governed by a profound and powerful logic. As in all the works of the new theatre, here too the life of the spirit consists essentially in an abrupt shift from one plane of reality to another, driven by reflection: inner life no longer proceeds through slow developments and gradual transitions, but through discontinuous leaps, through painful and violent upheavals.

Bruno locks up his wife, the mask, and tortures her for

to find out who her lover is: she has no doubt that there is a lover. Unable to discover this, and to escape the doubt that torments her, Stella is forced to give herself to Petrus. In this way, he will finally gain certainty, however painful it may be. To restore his peace of mind, Stella obeys him. She betrays him out of love. A futile sacrifice. Bruno refuses to believe that Petrus and Stella, whilst locked away together, truly betrayed him: it is a ploy by Stella to conceal the name of her true lover from him. And the torment begins anew. And herein lies the beauty, the originality, the importance and the profound relevance of this most singular farce, a masterpiece of the most modern French theatre. Here there is no other possible reality than that which the spirit posits and accepts as such: a reality that imposes itself from without upon the spirit with the irresistible force of the given no longer exists. The spirit denies and dissolves every given insofar as it is purely such. For it, there is no reality other than that which it posits and creates from within itself. Bruno seeks the absolute of certainty, but wishes to find it in an external fact: yet there is no external fact that can impose itself upon the mind with absolute evidence, that can bend a mind which refuses to accept it. The most overwhelming evidence, by normal standards, would compel Bruno to believe himself a cuckold: Bruno's spirit, clinging to doubt, contemptuously denies any certainty coming from without, whilst stubbornly seeking it precisely outside, and demolishes it every time it assails him to subjugate him. In vain does Estrugo, Bruno's scribe and double, who symbolises Bruno himself

in that part of him which is normal and reasonable, protests and objects: Bruno always cuts him off mid-sentence.

To uncover Stella's unknown lover—the only man who, in his view, is cuckolding him—Bruno forces his wife to sleep with the entire village: just one man, he thinks, will refuse this strange invitation, and that man will be Stella's true lover. And the whole village passes through Stella's bedroom and leaves satisfied. And yet Bruno, who is as cuckolded as one can be in this world and by his own choice, believes he is, yes, but only because of Stella's unknown lover whom his imagination has created: as for the young men who shut themselves in the room with Stella, he believes she leaves them empty-handed and that her supposed betrayals are nothing but manoeuvres and deceptions to hide from him the name of that one man whom he seeks so earnestly. And poor Stella, out of love for Bruno, goes so far as to betray him countless times so that he may at last be certain that she never betrayed him with that stranger of whom only Bruno is jealous, and that he... does not exist: to avoid sinning, she does not choose her lovers, but takes them as they come, and therefore, in all conscience, she still feels and considers herself pure.

Determined to know the truth, Bruno disguises himself and serenades his wife. And Stella, who has not recognised the singer, but sees in him an echo of the Bruno of old – the one of today, ugly and thin and mad, is beginning to displease her – is about to abandon herself to him fra le braccia. Bruno ha ormai

found proof that Stella is cheating on him? No: once again, nimble and mad, doubt gets the better of him. He suspects that Stella has recognised him and that she has played this charade to hide the name of her lover, her real one, from him. Desperate, realising that nothing will ever persuade Bruno, Stella flees the house with the first man she comes across. 'Another one of her tricks,' murmurs Bruno, 'You won't catch me out again!'

To those who do not view it through the lens of metaphysics, Crommelynck's drama is pure and simple farce; it is absurdity and madness themselves brought to the stage: from the perspective from which it is viewed here, it is the very tragedy and farce of thought, whereby the only world that exists is the one it posits, the only reality and truth is that which it creates from within, and which appears absurd and mad to every other thought that takes a different perspective; of thought which, determined to doubt, no external evidence can subdue with the certainty of the absolute, which, by persisting in seeking it outside itself, will never succeed in finding it.

His madness has locked Bruno away in an enchanted castle, which no one can enter, and from which no one will ever be able to free him. Bruno now lives in a world of his own, governed by a very particular logic, in which everything is explained, everything is in order, everything is coherent and rational, and the events of the outside world lose the meaning that normal people believe to be inherent in them by nature and acquire a different and opposite one. The individuals in * * live one side of the other,

incommunicable and alien, as if they inhabited infinitely distant planets. In this sense of fearful solitude lies the tragedy of **Cocu magnifique**: a tragedy that lends an eerie, spectral, unreal air to the unfolding of the action. The tragic and the grotesque merge here, as is necessary in a world that has lost all inner meaning and all inner rationality, where the same series of events can be interpreted in vastly different ways, where the threads of reality and madness have become so entangled that one no longer knows how to distinguish and separate them.

IV.
ITALIAN THEATRE FROM GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO TO LUIGI PIRANDELLO

1.

Amateur of sensations: the famous definition that a distinguished critic gave of Gabriele d'Annunzio is still, perhaps, the best that has been offered to date, and the one that best characterises his work as a poet and playwright. It is difficult to fully extract the essence contained in that definition, a feat that even the man who first put it into circulation failed to achieve.

An amateur of sensations, yes, certainly, provided the word 'sensation' is interpreted in a dynamic and active sense, eliminating without residue any notion of passivity or inertia of the spirit that it might suggest. Sensation, yes, but in the sense of passion, or better still (excluding any notion of romanticism or sentimentality) of an elemental, primal, uncontrollable spiritual force. Lust, violence, a thirst for vengeance, a craving for adventures in distant lands, a spirit of struggle and conquest: these and similar passions, these elemental forces, these deep, overwhelming impulses sweep away the characters of D'Annunzio's tragedy:

> Will,
> Voluptuousness,
> Pride, Instinct, an
> imperial chariot...

An amateurish approach to sensations, which does not mean, as the author of that famous definition perhaps intended, indifference towards this or that life experience, but only that particular attitude of the D'Annunzio spirit whereby the Poet does not lose himself, does not forget

He does not immerse himself in contemplation of the creatures he brings into being; he does not merge with them or become one with them, but, in the very act of creating them, he detaches himself from them and gazes upon them with admiration and adoration, taking pleasure in the fact that they are so intoxicated with vengeance and ambition, or mad with lust, or frenzied with a will to power.

This amateurish attitude – in the sense just explained of the word – makes means account of the essential characteristics of D'Annunzio's tragedy. Precisely because in d'Annunzio does notis enough create characters lustful lustful violent, but the it is essential, in the very act of creating them, to detach oneself from them and to contemplate them with delight; D'Annunzio's tragedy is entirely devoid of any psychological progression or development. D'Annunzio, in fact, presents us with—and must necessarily present us with—his heroes precisely when the forces acting within them, urging and overwhelming them, have already reached their peak of tension, and can no longer grow or expand. And it is precisely this which, by shielding them from any influence that external events might exert upon them, destroys at the root any possibility of a genuine plot. By the very fact that, whenthe tragedybegins, those primordial and elemental forces have already reached the height of their development; their struggle against the inner forces set in motion by religion and morality is no longer possible: even if there was one, the moment of struggle against these psychological inhibitions has already passed by the time D'Annunzio's tragedy begins. Its germinal core and

What is essential, therefore, is not the struggle of instinct against the higher forces of moral life, understood as something opposed to, superior to, and transcending it.

However refined the expressions with which the characters describe their state of mind to themselves and others, this is, at heart, simple and elementary. By showing us—and taking pleasure in showing us—how much instinct, how much nature, how much uncontrollable primal force lurks beneath the civilised appearances of our humanity, the Poet brings to light the terrible face of Life. Here, instinct is Fate itself:

> Instinct, brother of Fate,
> A true god in the temple of the flesh!

D'Annunzio's characters are, and feel themselves to be, at the mercy of the Furies. Their actions and words are frenzied and violent. The Poet places them in settings where the forces roaring within them can run riot more freely: either in archaic, primitive and savage times, or, better still, in times of decadence and ruin, when the social crust crumbles and the most atrocious and insane passions burst forth into the clear light of day. With the patience and love of a highly experienced antiquarian, he describes in minute detail the environments in which they live, the objects that surround them; and the further those environments and objects are removed from our own prosaic, bourgeois age, and the more unusual, archaic, strange and marvellous they are to us, the more he delights in and takes pleasure in them. What attracts him to history is not what, beneath the diversity of external appearances, is universally

, in which we too, as people of today, can find and recognise ourselves, but, on the contrary, what it offers us that is most exotic and distant from our present civilised humanity.

Hence the extraordinary importance of the stage directions in D'Annunzio's tragedies, an importance that grows as one moves from his early works towards his later ones, in which the drama, increasingly impoverished of vital substance, increasingly gives way to the scenography, the dance, the musical choruses, and the plastic, sculptural or pictorial tableaux, and aspires to resolve itself into cinematography. And it is no coincidence that d'Annunzio was the first of the great contemporary artists to embrace cinema in grand style. The elemental passions, the simple forces, the violent instincts that he loves to portray to us—being the natural state of mind of the crowd, the thousand-headed monster—occupy a vast place in d'Annunzio's tragedy, and in handling them he proves himself an incomparable master: the first act of **La Figlia di Jorio** suffices as an example.

Dilettantism, we have said, is the fundamental tone of d'Annunzio's work. Its dominant and central motif is the yearning and nostalgic delight (and precisely because it is nostalgic, ultimately romantic, of a romanticism akin to Flaubert's in **Salammbô** and **La Tentation**) in this raw force of life which, freed from the bonds of law and morality, gives free rein to itself. Not barbarism, but romantic yearning and nostalgia for the barbarism, of the animal human

unaware and true, of *divine bestiality*. And this explains why D'Annunzio's characters – who are, after all, always the same character placed in different settings and situations – lack any spontaneity: they never lose themselves nor let themselves go, but are, and at the same time, see themselves, define themselves, describe themselves, paint themselves, sculpt themselves. Their actions, their gestures, their words are stylised, rigid, crystallised; they never know the sweetness of abandonment, remaining always on the plane of reflected consciousness, of will sustained and stretched in effort.

Sensuality and naturalness, then: this, at its deepest and most fundamental level, is the dominant theme of D'Annunzio's theatre. But nature here is experienced—or rather, yearned for and dreamt of—as passion, as instinct, as impulse, as an unstoppable and fatal driving force, whose law is to grow upon itself, to expand, to flourish, to spread and, having reached the height of its development, to pass through destruction and death. And it is precisely this that spiritualises D'Annunzio's sensuality and purifies it of every base and vulgar element. Sensuality, not Epicureanism, and a sensuality that tends to consume and burn itself, to become spirit. A dynamic and heroic sensuality, which has within it the law of ascending above itself and transcending itself through death: this is the moment that enables D'Annunzio to construct his drama. From the necessity of transcending oneself in death—a necessity which the hero accepts in the very act

of yielding to the violence of the natural force that overwhelms him and of merging with it, d'Annunzio's drama takes root. The sensualism is thus thus into idealism, into an activist, which remains , however, always, deeply subtly sensualistic subtly sensual. No sensation is more exquisitely Jewish and intense than that which D'Annunzio's hero savours in the incomparable and unique moment when he transcends himself in death. This is expressed in Mila's cry as she marches towards the pyre: – *The flame is beautiful! The flame is beautiful!* –

Amateurism in *action*, understood as a surge of life and self-transcendence.

Stirb und werde, die and become, is the law of nature in D'Annunzio's vision of life and the world.

2.

And this is what gives it its profound modernity and, for Italy, its incomparable historical significance. The sentiment that Gabriele d'Annunzio had of life – a drunken surge that from moment to moment flares up more and more, ascends, surpasses itself, and touches and savours the utmost fullness by passing through self-destruction, a heroic, energetic, panicked impulse that never lives so intensely and fully as when it dies to itself – this feeling, albeit amateurishly coloured and sensualised by d'Annunzio's temperament, is the very same that the great European poets of the nineteenth century, each in their own way, had of life, in whom the deepest soul of modern civilisation expressed itself.

In Italy, d'Annunzio was the first to feel and experience life in this way; he was therefore the first among us who, anticipating the Futurists, enthusiastically celebrated the mechanical wonders of modern civilisation, *the hidden ferocity*, the *voracious life*, *the horrid glory* of the terrible cities, and exalted the heroes of *the Will to Power*, the new Ulysses set out to conquer the world. First among us, he sang of the divine intoxication of the boundless:

> 'And what joy
> did you find more glorious?'
> 'The joy of breaking down
> the raised barrier.'

First among us, he saw the essence of the modern soul in the overturning of all the limits imposed on man by nature

and by history:

> Fate removes
> its limits from all spaces,
> vanquished and cast aside
> forever
> by the freedom of heroes.

And this is what makes his work of extraordinary historical importance to us Italians. Firstly, d'Annunzio – albeit in an amateurish and sensually colourful manner – introduced into Italian literature, which had been slumbering on moods long since overtaken in Europe, the modern, energetic, dynamic, Dionysian experience and feeling of life; first, he brought Italy up to speed with the new, original, modern and contemporary mood of Western Europe, and this is the true reason why, after Leopardi, he was the first Italian artist in whom Europe found and recognised itself, for he was the first to speak to Europe in a European language, whilst others had spoken or were speaking a language that was strictly national or even provincial, which found no, nor could find, vast and profound resonance outside our country. Modern ethics, which places virtue and happiness in the act of living, and conceives of life as an eternal drive towards self-transcendence, and makes of it an eternal dying in order to be reborn higher and further, and to live again more fully, intensely and all-consuming—this ethics which, as I have shown elsewhere[16], is the true religion of our times, the secular religion of Action—has been, albeit in a form

16 See the essay on *'The Religion of Action'* in **Voci del tempo**.

individualistic and aristocratic, the ethic of Gabriele d'Annunzio, and he was its first and greatest master here in our country. It was he who sang:

> ...only in struggle is there joy...
> And each is true to himself,
> each is faithful to himself:
> a bow that loves its arrow,
> an arrow that yearns for its target, a
> target that is always far away.
> ...the human soul does not live
> if not for his ceaseless
> endeavour to have his image
> things as an imperial
> seal.

Make the nation that to which the individual dies and that in which he revives and is reborn, and you shall have the religion of the fatherland. In the religion of the fatherland, D'Annunzio's individualism is nullified, but the concept of life as an eternal dying to oneself in order to be reborn higher and further is preserved in its essential dialectical rhythm. And since this dialectical rhythm of dying to oneself in order to be reborn into something higher than oneself is the very same that lies at the ultimate core of Christian ethics as shaped by Saint Paul, Gabriele d'Annunzio can, as an expert amateur of sensations, even flirt with Christianity without thereby betraying the profound and essential law of his nature.

Like all the great poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Gabriele d'Annunzio too was a great herald of moral and vital values (whatever

final judgement one might pass on the ethics of which he made himself the herald), Carlylian in his heroism as *a prophet* no less than as *a poet*, a master, even by example (and what an example!), of life and action to his contemporaries, to whom he sang his word with such fervour that they made it flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood:

> and such was the fervour
> that the dream equalled the deed.

3.

Gabriele d'Annunzio's tragedy is the tragedy of the will to live, life conceived as a surge of eternal self-transcendence.
The tragedy of Sem Benelli by Ercole Luigi Morselli by Luigi Pirandello is the tragedy of impotence and, at the same time, of the longing to live in this way. In this sense, but in this sense alone, Benelli, Morselli, Pirandello are the Anti-D'Annunzio, the *'no'* opposed to *the 'yes'*, to that *'yes'* so clearly defined.
A few words on Morselli, whom I have discussed at length elsewhere. In *Orion,* he transports us to a realm of pagan carnality and uses irony to dissolve D'Annunzio's intuition of life, embodying in the demigod Orion the will for a full and intense life that throws itself upon the world like a storm to make it its prey, yet which the sting of a tiny scorpion is enough to bring crashing down to the ground in an instant. In *Glauco* he sings melancholically of the vanity of the will to power and to a superior life, which, having left the family hearth to chase the phantoms of empire, wealth and glory across the world, when he returns to cast the conquered treasures at the feet of the one who has remained waiting for him and for whom alone he has fought and won, finds the hearth cold and the one who waited for him gone, and with her sinks into the whirlpools of the sea to weep there eternally for his infinite sorrow. In Morselli, the longing for life as a surge of eternal self-transcendence and, at the same time, the inability to live it are artistically expressed in the

form of delicate, fairy-tale idylls, all suffused with trembling melancholy.

In Sem Benelli, man appears as a fallen god who remembers the heavens, an angel cast out of paradise and plunged into the smokiest and blackest tavern of evil, where, wallowing in mud and filth, he attempts to overcome, though without success, the regret for his lost heavenly homeland with the joy of an ever more subtle malice, an ever rarer perfidy, an ever colder and more diabolical wickedness. Against this unhappy being, gnawed by an indefinable longing for an unattainable good, Life, symbolised by a sensual, treacherous and elusive woman (*Ginevra, Violante*), takes pleasure in plotting a hideous trick. The gates of the lost paradise reopen before him; sweet voices invite him to return; the wings of the soul gain the strength to extricate themselves from the mire in which they were entangled and to beat the air in the surge of flight. But he has barely crossed the threshold of paradise when, once again, an invincible and dark force hurls him back down, and this time forever, into the mire and putrefaction. A tragedy of the inability to live a life of superior purity and nobility, to which one nevertheless aspires, albeit confusedly; an inability that generates within itself a cold perfidy, a satanic joy in the evil of others and oneself, a cheerfulness of the desperate and the damned, with sudden bursts of hope, goodness and purity—fleeting flowers that fate soon scatters with the cold wind of disillusionment. *Tignola, Lorenzino, Giannetto*, the *Buffone*: a always different and always the same

a character who is always different and yet always the same, various manifestations of a single sentiment, of the same fundamental life experience, who in **Tignola** dresses in modern style and speaks in prose, and in **La Maschera di Bruto** and **La Cena delle beffe**, and *in *Arzigogolo** wears the historical costumes of Caramba and speaks in that same harsh, dry, bare yet versified prose (Benelli's famous so-called *'dramatic* and spoken' verse, as opposed to d'Annunzio's *'lyrical* and *recited'* verse: this being a necessary expression of a will to live and to surpass oneself, which contemplates and delights in itself, just as the other is a necessary expression—at least intentionally—with its virtuosity of rhyme and the poetic devices that accompany it, of a will that torments itself in the awareness of its own impotence). Benelli's spiritual stance is one well known to the old Romanticism, but to which Benelli has imparted a new accent of desperate, icy, atrocious bitterness, in which lies his true originality.

Like d'Annunzio and Morselli, Benelli too is more of a lyrical than a dramatic temperament, possessing a vague, indefinable lyricism incapable of taking concrete form in characters. His poetic experience lies on the other side of drama; his heroes are defeated even before they engage in battle. Drama is replaced by an external web of events simulating the contradictions and developments through which drama is generated. The form of expression to which Benelli's poetic experience inexorably aspires is lyric. His heroes come

presented to us through their confessions, and once they have confessed, we have nothing more to learn about them. Facts as many as we like, even too many, but experiences of inner life, no. The drama is virtually exhausted in the monologue-confession-commentary-description-recitation, through which the fallen angel, now a demon, presents himself to us and describes himself. Benelli, like d'Annunzio and Morselli, lacks the faculty that alone makes the playwright: the ability to create characters embodying conflicting states of mind and in the process of development. He can create but a single character, always the same, a lyrical projection of subjective experiences. Subjective poets, in the strictest sense of the word. Benelli has an irresistible tendency to imbue this fundamental poetic experience of his with metaphysical and universal significance: it is the drama of fallen humanity, yearning in vain for its redemption, that he wishes us to feel in the drama of his sorrowful heroes. Irresistibly, these figures tend to fade into the background and loom large as symbols. The poet places them in imaginary or pseudo-historical settings, where, through the mist of unreality, they stand out in stature and tone, so as to appear as elemental and primal forces of the spirit. But Benelli possesses neither the scope nor the cultural grounding necessary to bring this symbolic amplification to a successful conclusion. It remains almost purely intentional and generates areas of shadow in his plays, which can only be explained by bearing in mind that this obscurity is the sign of a symbolic process that has not been successfully realised. Unfulfilled intentions, unsuccessful symbolic amplifications

, failures poorly concealed beneath pompous, heavy, verbose dramaturgical and cinematographic constructions; yet beneath all this rubbish lies a restlessness, a tremor, an electric vibration, which are enough to instantly distinguish a Benelli play from a play by the many wretched manipulators of pseudo-historical dramas who followed in his wake.

The theatre of d'Annunzio, Benelli and Morselli forms what is known as *the* Italian *theatre* of *poetry*, so called because, reacting against the empirical psychology of bourgeois comedy and the documentary and realistic particularism of thesis-driven or character-driven theatre, entirely devoted to the resolution of minute, everyday problems, he reaffirmed the need for a lyrical concreteness and universality, thus paving the way for the new theatre, which re-proposes, or tends to re-propose, the problem of the spirit in its totality and wholeness.

4.

Gabriele d'Annunzio's tragedy begins when that very force of life and self-transcendence – for which he harbours a nostalgic and amateurish longing – has already reached its zenith, leaving behind all the obstacles that morality, religion and social law might have placed in its path. If, on the other hand, one grasps that very force at the moment it collides with the internal and external structures into which law, morality and religion have sought to channel its course, and regards it as essential for that force to collide with those structures and attempt to shatter them, one will find the theatre of the grotesque and the theatre of Luigi Pirandello. It is quite clear that this is not to say that they derive from the theatre of Gabriele d'Annunzio, but only that they realise (or strive to realise) aesthetically the same intuition of life and the world that takes shape in the latter, but captured at a different ideal moment in its development.

All three of these theatres are expressions, in various forms and stages of development and with profoundly different emotional tones, of the same irrationalist, voluntarist, anti-bourgeois experience of life and the world. 'That same fierce life force which Gabriele d'Annunzio sees, raised above all laws, running free and hurling itself towards death in an attempt to rise heroically above itself, the grotesques perceive pessimistically as a chaotic surge without purpose or destination, in which,

as in a stormy sea, the spiritual constructs of society and history fall and sink. For Gabriele d'Annunzio, its law is to soar above every limit, to aspire to the joy of absolute freedom, in which it is nothing but itself and only itself. For Pirandello, its necessary law is: to define oneself, to set oneself a limit, to cast oneself into a form and, at the same time, not to be exhausted by it, but to feel the form as a prison and to clash against it in the vain effort to dissolve and fluidise it and to return to one's primitive purity and nakedness.

Beneath every superficial difference, therefore, a single and identical intuition of the world—irrational, voluntaristic, and activist—is expressed in both these artists at different moments and with different emphases: in Pirandello, with a keen critical awareness, a pessimistic emphasis, and a humble and absolute surrender to the law and rhythm that govern it—all of which are entirely absent in d'Annunzio, who is sensually amateurish, intoxicated with heroic optimism, and lacking in critical reflection.

Now, if what Giorgio Simmel, the eminent German philosopher and art critic, recently observed in **Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur** (1921) is true, namely that the defining feature of modern Western culture—that which distinguishes it from all other cultures that have flourished on earth to date and constitutes its originality and absolute distinctiveness—is the endeavour which, for the first time in history, Life makes to realise itself in its absolute and primal nakedness as Life, as naked Life, as

formless living being, as pure and unlimited activity, beyond all the limitations, objectifications, definitions, constructions and forms into which, in previous civilisations and cultures, it had allowed itself to be pigeonholed or channelled, nothing is more topical, nothing is more truly present and our own than the very modern Italian theatre (culminating today in the theatre of Luigi Pirandello), in which, despite the diversity of the writers' temperaments, this profound ambition, this secret torment of the contemporary soul, attempts to achieve—and sometimes achieves—its artistic expression[17] .

17 On Gabriele d'Annunzio's **La Figlia di Jorio** and Sem Benelli's **Arzigogolo**, see my reviews in **Rassegna Italiana** for May and October 1922 respectively; on E. L. Morselli, see the essay in **Voci del tempo**.

See THE THEATRE OF THE GROTESQUE

1.

Despite its relative lack of artistic achievements, the *Theatre of the Grotesque* is of considerable importance as a significant symptom of that profound crisis of intellectual and moral disorientation that predated the war, but which the tragic experiences of the war and the global crisis have intensified and brought to the fore. The old ideals are dead. The old stars that shone upon past generations have faded one by one; no others have lit up, and the firmament stretches out, desolate and black, above our heads. Life has withdrawn from the old institutions, leaving their arid, empty shells behind. If they still endure, it is due to the grave inertia of dead things and because nothing has been created to replace them. But souls do not passively resign themselves to the inert torpor of a vegetative existence. Within them lies a vague, obscure, indefinable sense of the ideal, which prevents them from settling into the materiality and routine of the present, and spurs them on to transcend it and create new forms of life. But it is a confused stimulus without precise aims, which is lost in the vague and the indefinite, which never burns with the white heat of passion, never manages to take hold of the whole soul, never succeeds in transforming itself into the creative energy of new values. The intellect remains dry, empty, cold. Detached from social reality, this becomes an object of sarcasm and irony; but that confused and desire for life new, that nostalgia obscure

of the ideal, which fails to crystallise into anything concrete. All that the past created is a desolate ruin. All that remains is the indeterminate, the boundless, the formless, and, in the face of it, either a vague aspiration towards something new and superior that cannot be defined or specified, or the grimace of a smile that attempts to hide despair.

From this state of mind, which the generation that followed the great strain of the war experienced in all its anguish, sprang the *Theatre of the Grotesque*, whose dramatic intuition centres entirely on the struggle between the *constructs* under which, in good or bad faith, Life masks and hides itself, and the spontaneity of the vital instinct that reasserts itself against them from time to time. But the authors of *the grotesque* see almost exclusively the negative and destructive side of this struggle, so that Life appears to them as a blind and cruel force that builds only to tear down, and whose unbridled raging makes it futile to seek to assign it a purpose or a goal. Hence that certain air of gloom and funereality, of cynicism and bitterness, which pervades this theatre and which, in the long run, ends up making it quite unbearable.

The suggestion put forward by some that this theatre might derive from Shaw's is untenable. Not that the authors of *these grotesques* did not have an eye on Shaw's theatre and did not imitate some of its technical devices. And other influences from English theatre could be pointed out:

that of Synge's *The Rake's Progress* on Chiarelli's *La maschera* e *il volto* and of Barrie's *Dear Brutus* on Antonelli's *L'uomo che incontrò sé stesso*, for example. But, to stick with Shaw, it is the spirit of the two theatres that is different. Shaw possesses a social and moral conviction, to the preaching of which he puts his plays at the service, veritable diatribes brought to the stage, so that he could rightly define himself as 'a preacher in the guise of a clown'[18], whereas the authors of *the grotesques*, if they share any common trait, it is the absolute conviction that all is vain, that all is empty, that men are puppets in the hands of fate, that their sorrows, their joys, their actions are dreams of shadows fluttering in a world of darkness and mystery dominated by a blind fate. If there is any derivation, it is rather *from Harlequin*, *King* of Lothar, from Andreieff's plays (*The Black Masks* and *The Life of Man*), from Molnar's comedies—which also dissolve all romanticism through irony—and from the techniques of literary, pictorial and plastic Futurism.

18 See the essay on G. B. SHAW in *Voci del Tempo*.

2.

The *Theatre of the Grotesque*, as is well known, traces its origins to Luigi Chiarelli's play **La maschera e il volto** (*The Mask and the Face*), first performed on 31 May 1916 at the Teatro Argentina in Rome; the author himself described *it as 'grotesque'*, a term which the public subsequently applied to the entire new theatre. *La maschera e il volto* is a typical *grotesque*, conducted along a line of exaggeration and caricatural distortion, which is maintained from the first to the last scene with an exquisite sense of proportion, despite the indulgence with which Chiarelli allowed himself to exploit (and with what skill he exploited them!) the farcical motifs that the work offered him in abundance. Paolo solemnly declares to everyone that, having been betrayed in his honour as a husband, he would kill: suddenly faced with the necessity of killing, he feels that the murderous intent did not spring from within him, but was imposed upon him from without, by convention and society; it was not a vital necessity of his inner self, but an external and superficial encrustation, and he does not kill. But not daring, at first, to rebel openly against society, he comes to a compromise with it: he will spare his wife Savina, but she will pretend to be dead, change her name, go abroad, and he will tell everyone that he has killed her. Thus his honour will be saved. Paolo is put on trial, acquitted, and upon his return from prison is welcomed triumphantly: unknown admirers decorate his house with flowers, his wife's

compete to offer themselves to him, and the town celebrates in his honour. All the farce of human existence is revealed to him in its shameless and sinister nakedness. And this drives him to rebel definitively against society, and, in defiance of prejudice, to openly reaffirm his true self, his love for Savina—who is in love with him and has returned to greet him—with whom he flees abroad to save himself from the prison sentence he faces for feigning a crime. 'I no longer want to be accountable to anyone for my life—to society, to friends, to the law—nothing, that's enough.'

Beneath the mask of social convention, which the protagonist in good faith initially mistook for his own flesh-and-blood face, Chiarelli shows us that poor face, suffering and groaning in the effort to bear the deformed and rigid mask, which he eventually resolutely casts aside. The work concludes with an open declaration of defiance by the individual against society, but it stands out from common satire due to the light yet bitter tone with which Chiarelli treats it; from this, it is clear that he has no pedagogical intentions whatsoever, and that in the face of life he adopts the attitude of a detached, uninhibited and disillusioned observer. In **La maschera e il volto**, farce and drama are fused into a single whole, and therein lies the artistic merit of this fine work.

In the other *grotesques* that followed, the fusion was not quite as successful. **La Scala di seta** is entirely based on the contrast between Roberto, the man who possesses

conscience of honesty and the strength of integrity, and is therefore doomed to failure, and Désiré, the frivolous and foolish dancer, to whom life offers the silk ladder, by which one climbs gently, without effort, aided by circumstances, driven by the most conflicting interests, which gather round the climber so that he may ascend without wearing himself out. Surrounding the two antagonists is a whole world of political schemers, unscrupulous businessmen, loose women, and cuckolded husbands—a world which the author takes delight in portraying with cruelty, highlighting its futility and exposing its base appetites and selfishness. Favoured by life, Désiré marries a millionaire and becomes a minister. Yet he remains, at heart, a dancer. The crowd, which gathers beneath his windows and applauds his first speech as minister, as if it had never seen anything like it before, as if it will never see anything like it again, does not even now realise that, whilst Minister Désiré speaks of justice and freedom, his dancer's legs are dragging him into a wild dance. And it is with dance that this grotesque tale comes to a close. Its fundamental flaw lies in the characters of the antagonists. Roberto and Désiré are decidedly neither men nor puppets. The world teeming around them, though portrayed not without taste and irony, moves with such a mechanical rhythm that we never catch that flavour of reality which alone could make us feel the bitter contrast between what Désiré says, does and achieves, and the values that are scattered, the potentials that are nullified. The author now renders the attitudes of his characters in caricatured and puppet-like terms

characters; now he attempts to place them within reality. Every effect consequently falls flat, as they fail to be convincing in either respect. In **Chimere**, Chiarelli seeks to demonstrate the profound emptiness of the ideals—love, virtue, honour—with which men love to fill their mouths. Claudio and Marina have entered life believing, the former that he is a ruler and a fighter who loves the struggle for the sake of the struggle and victory, the latter that she possesses a righteous and pure soul incapable of compromise. Facing ruin, a banker offers them salvation on condition that Marina becomes his mistress. And the false superman Claudio falls without even a pretence of resistance; Marina struggles a little, then ends up capitulating too. But the central character of this *grotesque* tale is a cynical and brutally honest parasite, a spectator of life, *a* wandering *mouth of truth*, who wanders through the salons tearing away the iridescent veil of conventional ideals or lies in which others love to wrap themselves and pomp themselves up, and revealing to each one what they really think and are. This character ironically comments on the seemingly dramatic story of the protagonists, calmly awaiting the fatal end he knows they will reach and where, having come down from their pedestals, they will be brought down to his miserable level. The heroes' drama unfolds in the usual melodramatic and emphatic style, but the *madman of truth* who speaks in the Author's name dismantles it scene by scene and warns us that this is a false

drama that will end in farce. The trouble is that, here too, the drama gets the better of the Author and unfolds in earnest, whilst the ironic intention remains confined to the ramblings of *the madman of truth*, relegated to the margins of the action. And, split into two parts with no intrinsic connection between them, the grotesque falls apart.

In **The Death of Lovers**, it is romantic love that is caricatured: Love with a capital L, the inseparable brother of Death. As in **Chimere**, Chiarelli seeks to achieve this caricature of Love by placing, on the one hand, a pair of lovers engaged in a romantic affair—in the romantic and fateful sense of the word—and, on the other, an ironic character who, with a series of pinpricks, deflates the swollen bladders of illusion that the lovers have conjured up. But whilst in *Chimere* the pseudo-dramatic characters believe in good faith that they are actors in a drama, and it is without realising it that they gradually plunge into farce, in *La morte degli amanti* one never knows whether they are being serious or whether they are playing the part with the awareness that they are acting; they are now in the drama, now in the farce, now they strut about like heroes, now they play the fools, and the grotesque goes to hell. Eleonora dreams of a fatal and tragic love, and, fed up with never finding the tragedy, hopes to provoke it by revealing to her husband that Alfredo (the names themselves are characteristic here) is her lover. A plot twist and a difficult situation, from which Eleonora sees no other way out but suicide, which she proposes and imposes on Alfredo. And he, who

until then had acted as Eleonora's *foil*, constantly undermining her and bringing her back to the petty reality of life, allows himself to be persuaded and agrees to commit suicide with her. The two organise their final supper; then, having turned on the gas tap, they lie down on the sofa for one last embrace. But her husband arrives in time to save them. Were they really serious, then? But they had been clowning about too much beforehand for us to truly believe in their suicidal intentions. We are no longer in the realm of *the grotesque*, but in the old-fashioned satirical farce, such as **The Romantic Woman and the Homeopathic Doctor**.

In **Fuochi d'artificio**, a comedy bearing an unsettling resemblance to Giacinto Benavente's **Gl'interessi creati** [19], the contrasting ideal elements remain the same, yet the resolution appears different and opposite: here, it is the face or reality that succumbs, whilst the mask or appearance prevails. Also because – as Chiarelli teaches here, in Pirandello-esque fashion – there is no reality other than that which our mind constructs as such from time to time, etc. etc. Having returned home penniless and determined to commit suicide, Gerardo is saved and enriched by the rumour, spread by his confidant Scaramanzia, that he is a millionaire: the fame of his wealth, securing him unlimited credit, creates an appearance of wealth around him, from which real wealth is finally born. Gerardo tries in vain to rebel against that appearance; it is stronger than him and ends up overwhelming him, so that when, growing impatient, he

19 On this play, see the essay in **Voci del Tempo**.

He shouts *in front of everyone* that he is penniless, but no one believes him. The work fails because the characters possess neither empirical nor ordinary reality, nor are they puppet-like projections of real people: they are heroes from operettas and *films*, with the added pretence—which the heroes of operettas and *films* do not have—of making us believe in their reality. And is that Gerardo, who for three acts does nothing but say no, grow impatient and threaten to leave, yet never actually moves, meant to represent reality, which vainly attempts to rebel against appearances and ends up being overwhelmed by them? And what do Scaramanzia's schemes amount to? Simply spreading the rumour that Gerardo is rich, and that is all! What a marvellous country where the mere rumour of wealth is enough to generate real wealth within twenty-four hours! But in the meantime, Scaramanzia manages to make Gerardo genuinely rich insofar as Gerardo is a count and was once rich; that is to say, real wealth pre-existed the appearance of wealth, and now lends credibility to that appearance, so much so that Scaramanzia, who enriches Gerardo, has never been able to enrich himself, having always been penniless. But, then, it is not appearance that grounds reality; on the contrary, it is reality that grounds appearance, and farewell to *the grotesque*!

The essence of Chiarelli's grotesque lies in the struggle between the *mask* and the *face*, placed in such a relationship that they are not entirely external to one another and without intimate communication between them, so that the same character, who at the outset of the action is *a mask*, feels himself gradually becoming a face,

the *mask* peels away from his face under the impact of events, revealing his genuine features, upon which human feelings and passions are reflected. The essence of *the grotesque* lies, therefore, in the representation of the perceived, experienced and, ultimately, overcome between the *mask* and the *face*, between abstract external social ideas and concrete intimate individual feelings, between the superficial self and the deep self, between vital spontaneity and unconsciously accepted social pretences—which are therefore not initially perceived as pretences—that overlap with it and attempt to distort it. The *mask*, too, in a certain sense, becomes part of the personality of the person who wears it, and effectively becomes one with their secondary personality, which enters into conflict with the inner, primary self and ends up being overwhelmed and destroyed by it.

It is clear that in the four *grotesque* works that followed **The Mask and the Face**, what is missing is precisely the grotesque – that is, the process by which the *mask*, initially mistaken *for the face*, is gradually revealed as *such*, and the *face* of flesh and blood reasserts itself against it. Instead of the *grotesque*, we find old romantic and sentimental situations, which the author dismantles from the outside with the weapons of a facile philosophy that appears cynical and pessimistic, but is in reality naively optimistic. In Chiarelli's intuition of life, one need only throw the mask aside or – as in **Fuochi d'artificio** – accept it for success, wealth and fame to suddenly rain down upon one's head like hail.

The action takes place in elegant settings (music, dancing, parties), where it is easier to conceal the absence of humanity and life and to disguise the fragmentary and inorganic nature of the comedy[20] .

20 The analysis of **Fuochi d'artificio** is an addition to the 2nd edition.

3.

Luigi Antonelli takes a leap into the fantastical. *In L'uomo che incontrò se stesso (*The Man Who Met *Himself)*, he shatters one of humanity's most fundamental illusions: experience. The mature man regrets not having known in time; otherwise, he would have lived his life differently. A mistake. Even had he known, he would have acted as he did, closing his eyes so as not to see and his ears so as not to hear.

For two years, Luciano was married to a young and beautiful woman whom he loved deeply and believed to be virtuous and chaste. His illusion vanished on the day when, whilst travelling, he learnt she had been the victim of an earthquake; rushing back, mad with grief, to search through the ruins, he found her body entwined with that of her lover in an embrace of love and death. Since then, nostalgia for the past has tormented him ceaselessly: he has often dreamed of reliving the time of his brief marital happiness. Emboldened by the experience he has gained, he would no longer abandon himself to the naive trust of youth, but would defend Sonia against herself, thereby defending his own happiness through hers. One day Luciano finds himself on a fantastical island, the domain of a Dr Climt, a scientist and magician endowed with supernatural powers, through which he makes reality what men pursue as their dearest dream. And he makes Luciano's dream a reality: before him appears the Luciano of twenty years ago, with his wife Sonia, her mother and the false friend Rambaldo.

But in vain does the Luciano of the present warn the Luciano of the past to be on his guard; the latter refuses to heed the friendly warning and sees in the man who gives it the enemy of his happiness, which consists entirely of a naive and untroubled trust in his wife's fidelity. Luciano will leave the island without having been able to realise his dream, enriched only by Dr Climt's lesson: that one must look to the future and not to the past, if one truly wishes to live.

This is a theme of great poetry: the impossibility of reshaping the past according to the experience of later years, the blindness of youth that rejects the light offered by maturity. From this theme, comedy and despair should have been born in unison. But Antonelli has failed to draw from it a single truly lofty and moving note. That fantastical, unreal, superhuman aura is entirely absent, yet in works of this kind it is as essential as air to a living being. The unreality lies entirely in the initial premise of the play as such; once that premise is accepted, the relationships Luciano has with his wife and with himself twenty years earlier are of such realistic brutality that nothing distinguishes them from the ordinary relationships between people who eat, drink and wear clothes. And the entire course of the play is worthy of a rather vulgar *farce*, indeed.

Worse still in **The Tale of the Three Magicians**, where Antonelli develops the theme that only Poetry, which is Goodness, can bring light and peace to the world, which, subjected to the rule of absolute Truth and Justice, would

face an unending succession of catastrophes. Here too, the characters are so devoid of humanity, so superficial and vacuous, and their story is so crude, trivial and superficially contrived, that it is impossible to see in them a symbol of the story of our universal life. No lesson can be drawn from their cases. They are deaf and obtuse souls, from whom the formidable experiences to which the Author subjects them fail to elicit any deep or lasting resonance, but only idle gossip, gross errors and romantic nonsense of varying degrees of embellishment. Their story remains forever a frivolous, superficial and mechanical affair. Twice Antonelli has had in his hands most promising ideas for *grotesques*, both of which turned into *farces*, whose triviality his total lack of style has not even been able to lighten or spice up.

Bernardo the Hermit is nothing more than a run-of-the-mill romantic comedy of the old school (Luciano presents himself to Nora as the distant lover she does not know, wins her over, and ends up eliminating her real fiancé altogether), which Antonelli attempts to adapt into *a grotesque* by making Luciano the usual cynical and sentimental character and trying to give his adventure a profound philosophical meaning: men often find themselves in situations for which they are ill-suited, hence the need for those who are, in fact, made for such situations to drive them out and take possession of them, just as the mollusc known as the hermit crab takes possession of empty shells and makes them its home. Verbiage superimposed on the action, without the

the slightest intimate connection to it.

The Island of the Monkeys is a satire on human civilisation. Trained by men, the monkeys enthusiastically abandon the monkey civilisation founded on the innocence of instinct to adopt human civilisation, which, whilst teaching virtue and morality, instils curiosity and teaches the pleasure of sin. A motif from *The Penguin Island*, executed with a truly deplorable lack of style, grace and coherence.

It is not worth dwelling on a few vulgar exploiters of the grotesque trend, such as Carlo Veneziani, author of two grotesque *works*: **La finestra sul* mondo* (The Window on *the* World), featuring the usual character who pretends to be dead and observes life from the outside as if through an ideal window, and **Io prima di te** (*Me Before You*), which purports to be a satire on vanity and selfishness. Veneziani conceives the plot in the old-fashioned way, then attempts to ennoble it by giving it intellectual substance, which, however, remains entirely superficial and floats on the surface of the plot; and, at best, it amounts to the same old nonsense that has been circulating on the streets for centuries.

4.

*In *The Bird of Paradise**, Enrico Cavacchioli crafts a run-of-the-mill stage fable, deliberately as banal as possible, in the vein of Maurice Donnay's *The *Other* Danger*, but among the characters he creates one with a skull-like face—a character, says the author, who is symbolic, abstract, unreal, philosophical, whom people call *'Him'*, and who wanders amongst the protagonists suggesting questions, answers, thoughts and desires, urging them to action, foretelling what is to come. *He* is meant to represent that subliminal realm which, outside and contrary to the intentions of the reflective and conscious will, drives us to act under the obscure yet profound and effective influence of instinct; and so he considers himself defeated when the characters he sought to drag away from the beaten track allow themselves to be ensnared once more in the web of prejudices and conventional sophistry, from which they—or, to put it better, *He* within them—have been unable to free them. Having become puppets who no longer possess within themselves, but outside themselves, in others, in the society in which they live, the principle of their life and their movements, *He* abandons them to go and seek out other, fresher creatures, whom life has not yet defined and determined for ever, and upon whom he may therefore still exert his mysterious and profound influence.

An idea found interesting and novel, but one that needed to be exploited. Unfortunately, Cavacchioli let himself be carried away by the desire to *épater le bourgeois* through

philosophy, and has put pseudo-philosophical ruminations into *His* mouth which, when they are not pure and simple *flatus vocis* devoid of common sense, are indigestible and confused reminiscences of fashionable irrationalist philosophers. But where *He* is artistically realised, He appears not as an abstraction, but as the germinal moment of the volitional process, which, unfolding beyond the realm illuminated by consciousness and will, projects itself to the spirit as a suggestion coming from without.

In exploring the fragmentation of the psyche, Cavacchioli went even further in **Quella che t'assomiglia** (*The One Who Resembles You*), a drama about a sentimental and sensual woman who, having received no news of her husband missing in action, becomes the mistress of a charlatan peddler of illusions; overcome by remorse, she returns home upon the return of her paralysed and blind husband, whilst continuing to betray him, and ends up bound to him forever by the horror of those lifeless eyes that see and know everything. What is most interesting in this muddle of green-haired women, palm readers and men with wheels for eyes—in which inspiration is stifled by the anxious search for the most bizarre gimmick—is the staging of the action in the form of a mechanical puppet before the very person who carried it out and who, watching it from the outside like a disinterested and indifferent spectator, can only see it as a mechanical process, devoid of any inner spirituality or logic.

In *The Belly Dance*, the very core

of Cavacchioli's art, namely the romantic conflict between dream and reality that the author carries within himself as a past he has left behind, and the ironic treatment of this conflict, which is staged. Nadir is the ideal, the dream, the pure spirit: a eunuch and dancer, he makes Pupa fall in love with him, an amoral madwoman, a brute instinct, a mysterious nature agitated by undefined anxieties and curiosities. Unable to satisfy her, Nadir throws her into the arms of his servant Arlecchino, pure flesh without a soul, hoping that, freed from carnal anxieties, Pupa will be his in spirit. But Pupa falls in love with Arlecchino and he rebels against his master. Nadir kills himself. With the spirit dead, the flesh feels it can no longer live without him and can no longer hold on to its conquest: Arlecchino prostrates himself over Nadir's body and Pupa, deaf to his lamentations, disappears. In terms of the coherence of *its* structure and the logic of its development, **The Belly Dance** is superior to the previous plays: the transformation of the characters into puppets is initially very successful. However, these puppets—the stage projection of the abstract concepts through which the romantic relationship flows—at a certain point begin to act as if they were living, real people. Instead of destroying them with irony, as was his clear initial intention realised up to Arlecchino's victory, the author takes them seriously and weeps with them. And, as already in *Quella che t'assomiglia*, he falls squarely back into the old-style romantic comedy.

Osvaldo Cantoni-Gibertini went even further along Cavacchioli's path; in his **Fantoccio*,* he brought onto the

a man who carries with him a puppet and a black servant, the former a projection of his good self and his spirit of sincerity at any cost, the latter of his evil self. Here too, an outwardly daring technique serves a political satire that is certainly not particularly brilliant or overly innovative.

5.

In *Sogno d'amore* by the Russian Giovanni Kossorotoff, the romantic and nostalgic Andrea takes refuge in the mountains with Mary to consciously act out the charade of married life for a month, during which Mary, an experienced actress, has undertaken to let him experience all its joys and emotions. Andrea ends up falling in love with her, or so he believes, for real, and wanting to marry her.
In **Il Fiore**, *as seen through the eyes* of Fausto Maria Martini, on the contrary, a husband, a minor high school teacher, not yet entirely numbed by lessons and marking homework, in order to defend his love for his wife Giovanna from the boredom and lethargy of daily routine, decides to breathe new life and flavour into it by making a getaway to Sorrento and living there for a few weeks with Giovanna as if she were a lover. He constructs *a lover* in *his wife* in order to win her back; he pushes Giovanna away from himself to give himself the joy of taking her back. In both plays the situation is the same: it is the dream, the illusion used as psychological cocaine, that provides the spirit with a momentary escape from the prison of daily reality. And the result is what one might have expected: Giovanna takes a liking to the life of great luxury that sparkles around her; she sees her husband as her lover and finds him inferior to the many suitors who surround her; yet, still in love with her *husband* as ever, she refuses to betray him with her *lover*

—her *husband*, her shadow, the poor little professor left back in Rome to teach lessons and mark papers. A situation of exquisite modernity and subtle beauty, a spiritualised and profound *grotesque*, in which a splitting of the soul between reality and dream is captured with a sure hand, an anxious fluttering of wings from one to the other. With a brutality fuelled by the fear of seeing his happiness shipwrecked, Silvio takes Giovanna back, brings her home, and forcibly plunges her and himself back into the grey and petty life of the past. And Giovanna feels herself dying of longing and nostalgia. Temptation passes close by in the form of one of the gentlemen she met in Sorrento, but in her love for Silvio she finds the strength to overcome the temptation and set about rebuilding the lost peace. A *twilight* poet, Martini did not have the heart to tear Giovanna away from Silvio, the sole sweetness of his poor life. And yet this was the only highly logical and moral solution to the drama: Silvio, having destroyed with his own hands the moral foundation of the marriage, no longer had any right to that mediocre happiness he had scorned. A deeper and more severe artist would have developed Giovanna and Silvio's affair in a tragic sense. Martini, an artist more refined than forceful, halted it halfway, and reduced it from a tragedy to a mere escapade, a sentimental adventure, brightening it with scenes of secondary school teachers, reminiscent of Pirandello, but with a sense of serene humour and good-natured cheerfulness not found in Pirandello.

Kossorotoff was more logically severe with his

characters: realising that in her, Andrea loves only his dream, not the wife she would be in the reality of life but the *role* of wife she has played for him and which, in the reality of life, she could never be, Mary, who also loves him, refuses the marriage. With the dream severed from reality, the unity shattered, it is no longer possible to rebuild it. The two meet again as lovers: but with the actress in Mary dead, Andrea's dream vanishes, and with it love fades away. And Mary, in whom love is life sprouting from the depths, nourished by tears and blood and not the yearning of a dream, is left to weep over her irremediable defeat.

In **Il Fiore sotto gli occhi**, reality dispels fiction when the latter, having grown too powerful, threatens to overwhelm it. In **L'altra Nanetta**, by contrast, it is fiction that prevails. Seduced and abandoned by a scoundrel, Nanetta rebuilds her life by marrying a writer, Giacomo, and devoting herself to him with the unconditional dedication of her whole being: she lives now solely through the anxieties and joys of her life as an artist, in a contagion of phantoms whose touch causes her to gradually lose all sense of reality. Giacomo intends to draw material for a play from her story before she met and married him. Summoned by his artistic will, the past rises before Nanetta, vivid and present, and engulfs her in its whirlpool of shadows. And it rises not only as a shadow, but indeed as reality: after many years, Nanetta's seducer returns to reclaim the woman and the child. Reality and fiction merge and unite to torment

the unhappy woman. But Nanetta will never have the courage to do what the logic of artistic creation demands she do in the same situation as the other Nanetta, the protagonist of Giacomo's opera: to kill this shadow of the past that returns to destroy her present happiness. In vain does the unhappy woman attempt to adapt to the fiction that, born of her, has broken away from her and towers over her: defeated, she falls to the ground. And in the feeling of her irremediable inferiority, she kills herself.

With exquisite, if somewhat gentle, artistic finesse, Martini evokes the painful and romantic figure of Nanetta; with skilful and subtle gradation, he shows us her gradual descent into a realm of shadows that she ends up treating as a fixed reality: we follow with passion her struggle with the shadow, and little by little we see the shadow become an ever harsher and more substantial reality, whilst the Nanetta of flesh and bone fades ever more, grows fainter and, finally, vanishes like a shadow into the mystery. But the fiction that kills reality is here a purely literary fiction, which can have no hold except on a temperament particularly disposed to endure it and to fall victim to it. There is no deep necessity, in this theatrical vision, for reality to generate fiction of its own accord and clash with it: if this happens, it is due to a very specific circumstance that does not allow for generalisations. Nor does Nanetta's shadow appear to us as so superior to the Nanetta of flesh and bone as to legitimise in the latter that sense of desperate inadequacy which leads her to death: if this sense arises in

Nanetta is unique solely because of her fundamental psychological imbalance. Artistically less accomplished than **Il Fiore**, *The other Nanetta* in Martini's work reveals a considerable effort towards a more robust and spiritually complex and profound dramatic conception, and appears as the most successful expression to date of what lies at the heart of Martini's twilight art: the aspiration towards a higher ideal of life and, in the inability to realise it, the melancholic retreat into everyday life.

6.

One is not a child of one's own time for nothing, and this explains why artists whose temperament was intimately far removed from the intuition of life that underpins the new theatre were not insensitive to the fashion for *the grotesque*. *What one does not expect* from Arnaldo Fraccaroli and Luigi Barzini is, in essence, nothing other than a grotesque that is more or less Pirandellian in more ways than one. The hero of the comedy is a count steeped in romantic literature, bored to death by the daily grind of life and thirsting for the unexpected. One day, a film *crew* invades the courtyard of his palace to shoot a *film*. The count then has a brilliant idea: what if cinema could offer him that very unexpected event he is desperately, yet in vain, seeking? No sooner said than done. He strikes a deal with the head of *the crew* to provide him with a fine series of unexpected events entirely to his liking. That very evening, thieves break into the drawing room. The count catches them and, with his most charming smile, helps them fill their sack: he has taken them for actors providing him with the excitement he desires. From then on, he mistakes the whole reality unfolding around him for fiction: but this reality, which he mistakes for fiction, so prodigiously simulates what might be called 'real' reality in the count's eyes that he asks himself, in anguish, whether it is really fiction or reality, and ends up suspecting everyone around him of being actors and wondering whether he himself is truly himself or rather

an actor playing the role of a count. Once the criterion that alone distinguishes truth from fiction—namely, the logical sequence of events—has slipped from our grasp, it is no longer possible to decide whether we are dealing with truth or falsehood. A beautiful theme (already explored by Pirandello in **Cosi è, se vi pare**) from which, however, Fraccaroli and Barzini—concerned solely with making people laugh and incapable of assimilating anything more from modern theatre than its external and formal procedures and the empty mechanics of technique—have managed to extract nothing but a farce, and not even a particularly cheerful one, unable to delve into the universal significance of the stage story they had devised.

In the vein of *the grotesque,* not only did Domenico Tumiati contribute some ideas to **Il Conte Gioia**, but even Dario Niccodemi made his own contribution, writing **Acidalia**. Filippo wishes to cure men of jealousy; in order to preach effectively against such a fatal affliction, he first wishes to experience it himself; but, what a twist of fate! No matter what he does to induce them to betray him, his mistresses all stubbornly remain faithful to him. The poor devil will discover that they have all, in fact, betrayed him, and he will discover this just when he is furiously jealous of the one who betrays him most of all. But if the struggle between the mask and the face is necessary and essential to *the grotesque*, and this struggle is inconceivable unless the mask is itself somewhat of a face—that is, unless it adheres in some way to the personality of the one who eventually casts it off—then *this Acidalia* is not grotesque in the slightest. Indeed, Filippo's theories do not in any way

way his personality, neither the superficial nor the profound, but are pure and simple oddities and whims, which the slightest clash with reality causes to vanish like mist in the wind. There is no contradiction, no conflict—that particular conflict which constitutes the essence of *the grotesque*—but only a farce that is not particularly well-constructed nor particularly witty.

7.

All in all, one must admit that the result is meagre: a good play by Chiarelli, two good plays by Martini, a few clever ideas from Antonelli and Cavacchioli, and that is all. In conclusion, a great effort that has failed. And the reason for this failure, it seems to me, lies in the disheartening poverty of thought that afflicts our entire literature, into which reflection has still penetrated far too little. Such theatre is bearable only on condition that it gives rise to new and daring (even if radical and nihilistic) views on man and life. Instead, the poverty of thought of these authors has forced them to operate within the limited terrain of sexual morality—a terrain already turned upside down in every sense—or, indeed, to *regurgitate* the most hackneyed and trite clichés of political satire and café-style immorality. A failed endeavour, then. Yet not without merit. The *Theatre of the Grotesque* has (even in the titles of its productions, almost all of which reject the name *'comedy'* in favour of others that are more or less outlandish and bizarre) freed us from the tyranny of the purely realistic bourgeois comedy, of the old-fashioned sentimental or romantic comedy, and of the situation comedy. And even if its only merit were to have reminded us that it is futile to hope for a renewal of our theatre until it decides to take a dip in thought and philosophy, the

Theatre of the Grotesque would not have lived in vain[21] .

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2 1 The *Theatre of the Grotesque* has continued to live on in some works that add nothing new to what the earlier grotesques had said: for example, *Se quell'idiota ci pensasse* by Silvio Benedetti, with the usual living person playing a dead one who, having thus momentarily placed himself outside of life, sees its true face for the first time beneath the mask of convention that concealed it from him, and life appears to him as a base struggle of unbridled animal instincts (see my review in *Rassegna Italiana*, January 1923).

Of greater significance are certain works which, whilst not strictly *grotesque* themselves, would be inexplicable had the *grotesque* not existed: for example, **Belfagor** by Corrado Alvaro, an interesting (albeit overly schematic) attempt to depict the impossibility faced by Abstract Intelligence (Belfagor) in comprehending the ever-changing, fluid nature of Life (Alina) – and *Siepe a nordovest* by Massimo Bontempelli, *a philosophical farce* driven simultaneously by men and puppets who cannot see one another, so that events utterly mundane to the men appear to the puppets to be of miraculous and supernatural origin: a devaluation of history, that is, of the interpretations that men give to events falling within the sphere of their experience, so that what seems to us an extraordinary event—for the explanation of which we devise more or less arbitrary philosophies and mythologies—would, viewed from another plane of reality, appear a most vulgar accident (cf. my review in Rassegna Italiana of February 1923; see my essay on Bontempelli in *La Stampa* of 29 March 1923). (Note to the 2nd edition).

VI.
THE THEATRE OF PIERMARIA ROSSO DI SAN SECONDO

1.

By satirising it and dismantling it from within in **La maschera e il volto**, Luigi Chiarelli had dealt the old pseudo-romantic, sentimental, passionate comedy a blow from which, ever since, it has never recovered: a revolutionary work, which was beyond Chiarelli's actual capabilities and, probably, his own intentions, born not so much of a clear and conscious design on the part of the author, but rather of the happy and chance encounter of his artistic instinct with a situation more than ripe for revolution, in which a single apt word, had it fallen at the right moment, would have found a thousand mouths ready to repeat it like a battle cry. Indeed, when Chiarelli deliberately sought to create anti-bourgeois, anti-sentimental, anti-romantic theatre, the wrecking ball slipped from his feeble hands. Nor was he ever able to indicate what should be rebuilt in place of what had been demolished: to this day at least, his role, though in every respect highly beneficial, appears to be the purely negative one of a destroyer.

With Piermaria Rosso di San Secondo, we are already in the midst of reconstruction. Acting entirely independently of Chiarelli and the authors of *the grotesques*, without any professed revolutionary aims, knowing probably nothing of old and new theatre, guided solely by his artistic instinct, he, with a victorious and powerful surge, leaves behind the plain of relationships on the which he carries out the

bourgeois comedy and looks out upon the world, observing it through its own fresh eyes.

2.

Rosso's entire work rests on the fundamental contrast between North and South: the South, the sunny, Mediterranean lands, where the sun is fiery, the sky clear and blue, the sea azure, the earth dry and flower-strewn, the air filled with waves of sweet, drowsy scents; the North, the boreal and polar lands, where the sky is grey and overcast, the sea livid and black, the trees swollen with moisture drip rain onto the spongy ground, and a wind that never ceases carries shreds of cloud away and drives them to the far horizon; the North, land of men who have disciplined, organised, built and shaped their existence; the South, land of men whose lives are all impulse, instinct and passion; the North, land of sociality, of will, of history; the South, land of individuality, of spontaneity, of nature. A lyrical-symbolic projection, this antithesis of North and South, in terms of a poetic geography that should not be taken any more seriously than one takes Ariosto's geography seriously, suggested to Rosso by personal experiences of his youth, of two radically antithetical conceptions and visions of life.

All of them—men from the North and men from the South, fools and idiots—because they have emigrated down here to earth from a heavenly homeland, from an ideal land they inhabited before they were born and which they can neither recall with any precision nor forget; but the men from the North, thanks to the cold, the water, the inclement weather and the fog, have so

tamed their nature and lulled the stirrings of their heavenly essence to sleep that they no longer feel nostalgia for that heavenly homeland, and live as if the only true homeland were the one in which they now find themselves spending their days: they assign purposes to life which they pursue with all seriousness and conviction. But the men of the South live in a half-sleep that allows them neither to attach themselves to this earth nor to return to the heavenly region from whence they departed; they feel precarious, transient, ephemeral; they search anxiously for an object upon which to fix their gaze and find none, and pass from one to another in a constant restlessness and writhing. And life, this life, appears to them as a fable told by a fool, full of sound and fury and meaning nothing, and men are 'miserable, lost existences in an inexorably dark world, painful, weeping beings without reason or cause, without purpose or destination on a strip of deserted land, without hope of rescue, alone, eternally alone, each with himself, with his inexplicable sorrow, with his years to endure'.

Rosso feels himself to be of the southern stock: an emigrant like everyone else, and, moreover, a mad, incapable fool. Things, men and his very existence hover before his mind like visions in a dream, like the phantoms of hallucination: 'in life, in the rare glow of electric bulbs, it was only I who passed by, I, and not even I, but the shadow of a figure unknown even to myself, who certainly needed neither shoes, nor ladies' dresses, nor fountain pens, and who would never have submitted

to any municipal ordinance, nor would he ever pay a tax or a fine; for the simple fact that he was a character who did not exist. Outside of time and society, he would leave me and vanish as soon as I put him to bed, or rather as soon as I lay down myself, by candlelight. For he did not know in which century he lived, of which country he was, in which city he found himself, the why and how of his vain existence; he was a walking cloak'. The awareness of his fundamental nothingness allows him to laugh down on those who take life seriously, this everyday life: 'The human family, seen in a teeming vision across the whole globe, busy with their affairs, seemed to me to have been created for my amusement'.

But should the vision of that heavenly homeland—from which he was expelled, or from which he departed of his own accord, or into which he fell involuntarily (who knows?)—flit through his imagination, however confusedly, a heavenly light will spread across the earth, plunging things into an atmosphere of dream and unreality, dissolving all that gives them their concreteness, their materiality, their corpulence, their substance, transforming this hard, massive, heavy world of things and people into an insubstantial play of light and shadow, of colours and hues, into an immaterial harmony of scents, sounds and songs, making the earth a foretaste and a prelude to the paradise glimpsed and dreamed of: this is the state of mind admirably realised and expressed in the *Elegies to Maryke*, in *Signora Lisbeth* and in certain passages of the *Fugue*.

But let that glimpsed paradise close, let that

may that heavenly homeland fade into an unreachable distance; may the light that rains down from above to soften and dematerialise the earth be extinguished; and the earth will appear to the poet as a dark prison, with no possibility of escape, the domain of an irrational fate; men will seem to him like gloomy and ridiculous puppets whose principle of movement lies not within but outside themselves, the purposes of their existence masks they place over their faces so as not to look upon life in its nakedness and not to go mad with fear and horror, the disciplines to which they submit are tricks to help them live, shelters of branches and leaves against the mad storm of life that rages outside. And depending on whether that heavenly homeland shines upon Rosso's imagination or closes itself to his inner gaze, the world changes its appearance in his eyes, and as his vision of the world changes, so does his style: this was a spiritual, winged harmony of sounds and colours—clear, soft, delicate, subtle—disembodied and dematerialised by the light that rained down upon them from that homeland of dreams and enchantment; it becomes a convulsive cry, a desperate scream, a painful and distorted grimace, a raw and stark play of light and shadow, unfolding in a stifling atmosphere.

Yet in both cases, Rosso transports us beyond the plane and the system of practical and sentimental relationships upon which the bourgeois vision of life rests; he always denies it any inner truth, reality or substance, always from the perspective of his desolate and nostalgic romantic Platonism and tragic humour

he radically devalues that interplay of feelings, interests and concepts in which it consists and is exhausted. Life appears to him by turns as something infinitely more futile or infinitely more terrible than the bourgeois sense of life can concede. His characters are never mere characters, but lyrical-symbolic projections of moments in the poet's soul. The events that unfold among them are never plots or situations, nor do they ever claim to be taken literally, but always refer to something that lies beyond their outward appearance and materiality. Therefore, beneath a narrative appearance, Rosso's art is always essentially abstract and lyrical; whether it lulls itself in idyll or writhes in the agony of a mad and inhuman passion, it always lacks that certain adherence to the system of relationships in which reality consists in the commonly accepted sense of the word, that certain earthly weight which is necessary for bourgeois art and theatre. These are based on the reflected or unreflected admission that what is commonly called reality is, at heart, the only reality that truly exists—transformable and improvable, certainly, but only in its details or in the order to be established among them, never, however, to be denied *in toto et in pleno*; for Rosso, a Platonist and a Romantic, that reality is inwardly hollow and dead, and arouses in him no reaction other than gloomy boredom, tragic humour, and subtle mockery, beneath which quivers the restlessness of an intoxicated and dreamy spirit, fervent, nostalgic and restless.

3.

What we have said so far about the essential characteristics of Rosso di San Secondo's art will allow us to proceed more swiftly in our examination of his dramatic works. Of these, all those works must be condemned in which, having lost his inspiration, he was unable to create around his characters that atmosphere of unreality which instantly transports the audience to a plane of life different from that on which bourgeois theatre unfolds.

In **Amara** and **Per fare l'alba**, the two central characters (Amara in the tragedy of the same name, and the old man Sanza in **Per fare l'alba**) lead a frenzied, Dionysian existence, enveloped by mysterious and powerful natural forces, which are like the extension and symbolic outward projection of their inner lives. The old man Sanza is 'convulsed flesh',

'he vibrates all over', he is a mad surge of paternal love for his son, for whom alone he has worked and amassed wealth, so that he might avenge him for all he has suffered and enjoy what he has not enjoyed; he tastes and savours life only through his son: 'I am the root that lies underground: you are the branches, leaves and flowers: if you breathe above, in the open air, I breathe; if you do not breathe, I, underground, die. It will always be so; even when I am dead it will be so... For truly I shall not be dead, as long as you live for me'. In the first act of *Amara,* the protagonist appears to us enveloped and rendered frail by the scent of the sea and the woods emanating from the fabrics

her brother has sent her as a gift from the distant East, and which make her feel with even more bitter intensity the misery of the life she leads with a husband she does not love, who took her against her will, from whom she has separated in body as she always was in spirit. She has a son, but she does not yet feel herself to be either a woman or a mother and therefore does not love him; she is a fury burning to break the chains that bind her to ordinary men; she is a mad, thirsty solitude, and so she clings to the man from whom she hopes to be reshaped and reforged in her own image, and with him she flees, abandoning home, husband and son. Around these creatures of his imagination—instinctual forces (the instinct of fatherhood, the instinct of femininity) captured and frozen at the height of their development—Rosso creates a pan-like and Dionysian atmosphere, traversed by invisible, all-powerful, exasperated forces of nature. Amara appears to us drunk and blinded by the midday sun, driven mad by the scents of the ocean and the woods emanating from the fabrics that have reached her from distant seas; the old man Sanza is dazed by the heady scent of orange blossom that descends in waves from the mountain, making the mystery of the starry night throb with lust.

But the characters surrounding these two live, act and move within the common, realistic plane of life; they are, all things considered, fairly ordinary characters and, in the broadest sense of the word, bourgeois. This creates, in those two dramas, an imbalance of planes, a lack of organic unity and inner coherence. When placed within the common order of vital relationships

, Amara and old Sanza appear to us as purely and simply unbalanced and mad, whose actions—utterly disproportionate to the system of relationships in which they are embedded, devoid of any inner necessity or justification—are mad, senseless, paroxysmal and criminal. On a bourgeois level of life, what need is there for old Sanza to kill Carmelita's prince of a husband, who has come to reclaim his wife who fled to the young Sanza? Was it not enough that, as an old man experienced in life, he should have given his son the means to flee far away with the woman of his heart? Gabriele awakens the woman in Amara and, through the woman, the mother: she now pines with love for the son she abandoned when she fled. What need is there for her, having reawakened the mother within her, to kill the son she bore to Gabriele? The fact is that, having portrayed them as Panic and Dionysian figures—forces of nature pushed to the height of exasperation—Rosso has placed these two creatures within a fairly normal order and rhythm of relationships, where they move clumsily, awkwardly, ridiculously, like the albatross whose giant wings prevent it from walking.

And Rosso di San Secondo fails when he strives to imbue his dramatic visions with meaning and ethical content. He fails, because anyone who, like him, devalues, denies and dissolves historical human social reality, undermines the very foundation upon which an ethical vision of life can be built. What ethical purpose demands that Amara, in whom love has reawakened the love of a mother for her son

abandoned, to hate and strangle the son she had with Gabriele? If love has made her a woman and a mother, it is not clear why she does not love her second son just as she now loves her first; at most, the motherhood awakened in her by love might prompt her to abandon Gabriele and return to her husband, whom she does not love, to find her little Luciano abandoned there. What ethical necessity demands that, in the first draft of *Sleeping Beauty*, the Trembling Notary be tormented to death and driven to suicide by his aunt, the Desperate Old Woman, and, in the second draft, having lost even the escape of suicide, continue to suffer in the hell of life? Perhaps for having, in a moment of madness, seduced Carmelina or thus led her to take the first step on the path to perdition? It is a pity that the Notary has more than atoned by marrying Sleeping Beauty and thus becoming the village's fairy tale. What ethical value should we attribute to the figure of Stefano Brosio *in *The Desired Guest**, who is supposed to represent nothing less than the ethical steadfastness of masculinity—one who does not succumb to the bewitching arts of a corrupt and corrupting creature, and knows how to lead her to ruin using the very weapons she herself has forged— yet, instead, appears to us as a figure of uncertain nature—madman, imbecile or criminal—who, through a despicable deception, lures Melina into a trap and hands the dagger to the very woman who will murder her? What fine morality is that of one who, to free a friend from the snares of a perverse woman, becomes the necessary accomplice of a murderer! In pursuing an

ethical end, Rosso tends to restore weight, body and substance to those normal relationships of life which his art, in its most personal and original aspects, disembodies and dematerialises; in doing so, he denies the very root of his truest and deepest inspiration.

Let us set aside **Primavera**, a playful nocturne in three acts that unfolds like a *farce*, but a *farce* shouted by puppets with distorted features; in the author's intention, the spring night, suffused with scents and enchantments – itself an external extension of the characters' lives – has snatched them away from normal reality: an opera that has failed almost entirely; let us set aside *L'Ospite desiderato*, a tragic tale in three acts, which Rosso strives to set in an atmosphere of nightmare and reverie, hypnotic and somnambulistic, and to unfold in icy, crystallised, absorbed tones, without, however, succeeding; a failed work of which very little is salvaged save for a few traits of the protagonist, Melina, a woman steeped in sadism and treachery, a viperous creature, as poisonous as a marsh dragonfly, who has reduced her lover Paride to a wretch, has corrupted the maid Adalgisa to the core, and, since Paride places all his hopes of liberation in his friend Stefano, she herself persuades him to summon him to their villa for the perverse pleasure of destroying even this last hope, of shattering, emptying and annihilating this enemy of hers just as she has shattered, emptied and annihilated Paride, and ends up being killed by her maid, whom Stefano incites to turn her hand against her.

Let us pause to consider the two works on which Rosso di San Secondo's fame is firmly founded: *Marionette, che passione!* and *La Bella addormentata.*

4.

A telegraph office on a sleepy Sunday afternoon, a boarding house for singers, a *private dining room* in a luxury restaurant: these are the three settings in which the three acts of *Marionette, che passione*! unfold. Settings that are as anonymous, as impersonal, and as abstract—in their apparent concreteness—as one could possibly imagine. In these settings, three characters: the *Gentleman in Grey*, the *Gentleman in Mourning*, the *Lady with the Blue Fox*. Their names, the events of their lives—all that on which an author of bourgeois dramas would have lingered at length—are left unsaid, glossed over as unimportant; the story unfolds on other levels. These characters are nothing but three moments, three stages in the development of a single, identical passion; what matters to the Author is the point to which each of his sad heroes has arrived. How, why, from what starting point, through what events—it does not matter; these are skipped over. The true protagonist of the drama is not the three characters, but the one and same anonymous, impersonal passion that flares up within them, at three different stages of its development. Hence the characters have no names, and any insignificant detail of their clothing suffices to identify and distinguish them. Beneath an appearance of extreme realism, here too Rosso's art proceeds in terms of extreme abstraction, in a truly original and ingenious pairing of opposites.

The *Lady with the Blue Fox* is at the beginning of her

Via Crucis: dreamy, dazed, and dazed; she is an automaton, having lost all initiative. Having fled from the lover who mistreated her, when the *Lord in mourning* proposes that she join him, she is on the verge of following him; when the *Lord in grey* leaps up to warn them against the folly they are about to commit, she allows herself to be persuaded; she cannot resist and passively surrenders when the lover comes to take her back. The *Lord in mourning*, who mourns his shattered marital happiness, has moved beyond the stage of daze and despondency; he weeps, screams and struggles; to avoid sinking, he tries to cling to someone who might save him—to *the Lady with the Blue Fox*, to the Singer—begging them, for heaven's sake, to help him rebuild a life and find happiness again; he is blind and mad with grief, yet he trembles with reaction and desperate hope. The *Lord in Grey* has almost reached the very end of his journey; there is no hope of salvation left; every path has closed before him; from the passion that gnaws at him inside like a cancer, he is detached, like a sick man from his illness, and observes its fatal course almost from the outside and with cold detachment, not denying it the palliatives and diversions it demands, but with the perfect awareness that they are utterly futile and do not avert the fatal end; he is cold, ironic, even cheerful—a cheerful cheerlessness, macabre and desperate; to his two companions in misfortune he speaks in the benevolent, fatherly tone of one who has gone before them along the path they too will walk in its entirety, and when he reaches the end, he does not hesitate to show what is done in such cases: he poisons himself. Not

no longer characters, no longer personalities in the common sense of the word, but a single, impersonal force which the artist dissects and captures in three distinct phases of its unfolding; this force drives the creatures who bear it from without, emptying them of all will and humanity, turning them into three hard puppets, with abrupt, jerky, discontinuous movements.

Marionette, che passione! is a play of black and white against a grey background, of light and shadow on a white screen. *Sleeping Beauty* is what the Author has described it as: *a colourful adventure*, a vast, harmonious and complex interplay of colours. Here too, as in *Marionette*, Rosso denies any substance to that system of relationships upon which the normality and reality of life are based, but no longer, as in *Marionette*, by dissolving it into a play of anonymous, impersonal forces, but rather by observing it from the outside, detached and distant, in a moment of ironic disinterest and lyrical superiority. Life here appears to him as something as insubstantial and unreal as a passing cloud or a play of light in a mirror: a colourful adventure. Here too, the characters lose all concreteness, materiality and corporeality; they are reduced to patches of colour – *Blue Cheeks, Purple Nose*, the two *Velvet Fats*, the *Black of the Sulphur Mine* – to frozen, immobile, crystallised gestures – the *Desperate Old Woman*, the *Angry Spinster*, the *Trembling Notary*. In this world of pure naturalness and immediacy, moral conscience is absent and remote; the village prostitute, the *Sleeping Beauty*, lives in a dazed reverie like a placid, unaware, sleepy beast; she is on this side of

sin because she is on this side of consciousness, and therefore possesses within her a kind of light of purity and idealism, which leaves those who look upon her perplexed and astonished. If motherhood leads her to reject the further mercenary exploitation of her body and to return to the trembling Notary who seduced her and cast her onto the path of perdition—and to whom, therefore, the at least ideal paternity of the unborn child is attributed—it is not out of any impulse of remorse or moral conscience dawning within her; she cannot repent because she has never sinned ('I was asleep'); in a dream, a spirit warned her of the life sprouting within her, whose purity had to be preserved. She is a lump of clay that motherhood rouses for a moment from her beast-like stupor: she is on the fringes of humanity, between life and fairy-tale, a colour amongst colours.

The one who will turn colours into *an adventure*, a symphony of colour, is the Black Man of Zolfara, the chivalrous, selfless suitor of the Beauty, a lyrical projection of the Author himself. Sentimental and passionate, now sceptical and ironic ('I am all a scar, my dear!'), he views life with a detached and unscrupulous gaze, burlesque and, deep down, bitter. He likes what has happened to Bella for its strangeness: 'that is what I like: something that comes into being without having been sown'. And he throws himself into the adventure: 'Come on! All life is a colourful adventure: yellow is molten sulphur, but underground it is gloomy, like a prison; the sky is blue, the clouds white or grey; the villages, high up in the mountains, look like flocks when there is greenery all around,

'But often, when there is none, they seem scorched and iron-hard. People come and go, wander about: here there is plenty, there famine; human servitude finds no way to free itself.' And he brings the adventure to a close by forcing the trembling Notary – Carmelina's first lover and seducer – to marry his victim, who is pregnant by another: to achieve this end, he exploits the naive, mythical, fairy-tale ethics of Sleeping Beauty, arguing that since the Notary bears primary responsibility for what she has become, he must also bear legal paternity for the child born of the sale of her body; he exploits the Notary's weakness, the Old Woman's hatred for her grandson, speaks of justice and morality with a seriousness ready to burst into laughter—and which, indeed, bursts into laughter when the Notary, the embodiment of ordinary humanity, groans: 'I am a man!'

It is all a game, a bitter and refined intellectual joke, tipsy and nostalgic at heart, in which characters and events are composed according to purely colourful and lyrical relationships, outside any reference to the concrete reality of life. It is a pity that Rosso failed, in both the first and second drafts, to give this fine work a coherent and logical conclusion, and allowed himself to be sidetracked by the moralistic concern to symbolise, in Bella, the triumph of motherhood, thus freezing the colourful adventure into a game of symbols and allegories[22] .

22 In **La roccia e i monumenti**, Rosso di San Secondo once again brings to the fore the irreconcilable contrast between North and South, between life which, having rejected all form, unfolds in the wild freedom of unbridled instinct (Brunetto) and life which has taken on an immutable form (Isabella). Although

VII.
THE THEATRE OF LUIGI PIRANDELLO

1. Nature: to live without feeling alive.
2. Man: to live and feel oneself living.
3. The Dualism of Life and Form.
4. The detachment of thought from forms: humour and intellectualism.
5. Antithesis, the law of Pirandellian art.
6. The relevance of Pirandello's art.
7. The inevitability of forms: *The Late Mattia Pascal*.
8. The practical wisdom of Life: Corrado Selmi from *The Old and the Young*.
9. Affirmation of Life in its absolute nakedness: Vitangelo Moscarda from *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*.
10. The renunciation of Life: Don Cosmo Laurentano from *The Old and the Young*; Signora Ponza from Thus It Is (If You So Think).
11. Fear, tedium, pity for life.
12. Seeing oneself live: the paralysing *mirror*.
13. Destruction of character: the individual, a chaos of forces

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loving him passionately, Isabella, faithful to her duty, rejects Brunetto. The drama wavers uncertainly between the usual passionate tale and the higher meaning to which it seeks to refer, but it is kept above the level of an old-fashioned passionate drama by a fiery, violent, at times precious lyricism. (*Note from the 2nd edition*).

contradictory.

14. *One none one hundred thousand*: the incommunicability of individuals.

15. To be is to appear: *That is how it is (if you like).*

16. The chasm between past and present: *But it's not a serious matter*.

17. A present that feels like the past: *Lumie di Sicilia; The Late Mattia Pascal; Henry IV*, tragedy of a life that could not be lived.

18. The Pirandellian drama: the clash between Life and the Mask.

19. The opposition between the individual and the construct others have made of them: *Six Characters in Search of an Author; All's Well That Ends Well; As Before, Better Than Before; Capiddazzu Paga Tutto*.

20. Destruction of the mask constructed by the individual: *The Rattlecap; Henry IV; Clothe the Naked; The Life I Gave You.*

21. Acceptance of a mask imposed by force: *The Driving Licence.*

22. A mask voluntarily assumed by the individual: *The Game of Roles.*

23. Life's rebellion against the mask: *Man, Beast and Virtue; The Pleasure of Honesty; As Before, Better Than Before; But It's Not a Serious Matter.*

24. Triumph of the irrational: *The Graft; Think About It, Giacomino!*

25. The immanentist morality of Pirandello's world. Pirandellian women.

26. The thinking thinking, centre of Pirandello's drama.
27. Anti-intellectualism : the layers of reality.
28. The dramas of dialectics: *The Reason of Others*.
29. *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.
30. Flaws in Pirandello's theatre. Style.
31. The development of Pirandellian art. Conclusion.

1. – What, according to Pirandello, distinguishes man from other beings of nature? This, and this alone: that man lives and feels himself living, whilst other beings of nature, on the other hand, merely live, purely and simply. The tree, for example, lives entirely immersed in its vital sense; its existence is one and the same with the slow and obscure succession within it of vital processes; the sun, the moon, the wind and the earth are all around it, but it sees nothing of them, knows nothing of them: it senses them, yes, but only insofar as they translate into states of its own being, from which it is indistinguishable. Knowing nothing of anything else, the tree knows nothing of itself as distinct from anything else. Life flows through it unconsciously and silently, all in one go.

2. – But in man, even the most uneducated and uncouth, life splits into two: even for the most uneducated and uncouth man, it is essential to be and to know that he is, to live and to know that he lives. In man, life has become detached from and opposed to the feeling of life, says Pirandello: consciousness, reflection, thought, I would say, in terms that are philosophically more precise. In this

detachment, with the resulting illusion of taking this inner feeling of life—changeable and varied—as a reality objectively existing outside of man, lies the primary cause of human unhappiness. First, and not least, once detached from life, the feeling of life—or consciousness, if you will—tends, as it passes through the filter of the brain, to cool, clarify and idealise itself, and to crystallise from a particular, contingent, mutable and ephemeral feeling into a general abstract idea (cf. *L'Umorismo*,[2nd]ed., pp. 168 ff.).

3. – Having risen, through logical abstraction, to a second power of itself, having become reflective thought, the feeling of life tends to confine life within fixed and precise limits, to make it flow between pre-established banks, to cast it into rigid, immobile forms set once and for all: the concepts and ideals of our spirit, the conventions, customs, traditions, habits, and laws of society. Thus a fundamental dualism is established: on the one hand, the flow of blind, mute, obscure Life, eternally unstable and restless, eternally renewing itself from moment to moment; on the other, a world of crystallised Forms, a system of constructs, which attempt to stem and compress within themselves that eternally bubbling flow.

'Everything, every object, every life bears within it the burden of its form, the burden of being thus and of no longer being able to be otherwise, until they crumble to ashes' (cf. the novella *Candelora*). 'Every form is death. We are all beings caught in a trap, detached from the flow that never ceases, and fixed for death' (cf. the novella *The*

Trap).

4. – Most men live buried within those fixed, immobile forms, without even the faintest suspicion that beneath them a dark and furious ocean churns and boils. But in some, that very same strange and mysterious activity which, like lightning cleaving a cloud, has split life in two, and thought, breaks free from the forms in which the warm flow of life has congealed, and perceives them for what they truly are: purely provisional, ephemeral, contingent, fleeting, fragile constructs, beneath which the current of life as it is in itself surges and churns, beyond all human illusion and construction. In the person in whom this liberation from the forms of life has taken place, every human construct arouses a sense of contrast, causing it to crumble before their eyes. In this collapse there is something both comic and painful: comic, in that, as it collapses, it reveals the intimate futility of human constructs; painful, in that, fragile as it was, it was nonetheless a shelter for man against the mad storm of life. In this intimate mixture of laughter and tears, of the comic and the sad, lies humour, as Pirandello perceives and defines it. 'I see it as a labyrinth, where, through so many different, opposing, intricate paths, our soul wanders, no longer finding a way out. And in this labyrinth I see a statue that laughs on one side and weeps on the other; indeed, it laughs on one side at the weeping of the opposite side' (cf. *The Two-Faced Statue*, pref.). Insofar as humour is the state of mind of the person in whom

thought, having reached self-awareness, has broken through the barriers of concepts and constructs and has hung itself over the abyss of life to watch its incoherent and contradictory flow seethe, it is an essentially cerebral state of mind. *Humour and intellectuality*: the whole of Pirandello's art is encapsulated in these words.

5. – Antithesis is therefore the fundamental law of this art. The reversal of the ordinary, everyday relationships of life reigns supreme. Among the comedies, **Pensaci, Giacomino!** explores the theme of the husband who forcibly brings back to his wife the man he knows to be her young lover; *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù*, on the other hand, features the motif of the lover who forcibly brings the husband back to the marital bed; *Ma non è una cosa seria*, the motif of marriage as an antidote to the dangers of marriage; and amongst the short stories, *Da sè*, the motif of the dead man who walks to the cemetery on his own two feet, enjoying many things that neither the living nor the dead notice or enjoy; *Nenè and Ninì*, the motif of two orphans who are the cause of the ruin of a whole series of stepfathers and stepmothers; *Sing the Epistle*, the motif of a deadly duel caused by the uprooting of a blade of grass; *The Doctor's Duty*, the motif of the doctor who, out of a high sense of duty, allows the patient entrusted to him to bleed to death; *First Night*, the story of two spouses who spend the night weeping at the graves of one's fiancé and the other's first wife; *The Illustrious Deceased*, the story of an illustrious deceased buried at night and in secret like a dog, whilst in his place an unknown man receives royal honours, and

and that is enough, for one could go on giving examples indefinitely.

6. – The dualism of Life and Form or Construction; the necessity for Life to take on a Form and the impossibility of being exhausted by it: this is the fundamental motif underlying all of Pirandello's work and endowing it with a rigorous unity and organic vision.

This alone is enough to convey just how strikingly relevant the work of this writer of ours remains today. All modern philosophy from Kant onwards is founded on this profound insight into the dualism between Life—which is absolute spontaneity, creative activity, a perpetual surge of freedom, the continuous creation of the new and the different, and the Forms, or constructions, or patterns that tend to confine it within themselves—patterns which Life, time and again, by colliding with them, shatters, dissolves and fluidifies in order to move further on, a tireless and everlasting creator. The entire history of modern philosophy is nothing other than the history of the deepening, the conquering, and the clarification of this fundamental intuition to itself. In the eyes of an artist who possesses this living intuition – as is the case with Pirandello – reality appears, at its very root, to be profoundly dramatic, and the essence of the drama lies in the struggle between the primal nakedness of Life and the clothes or masks with which men claim, and must necessarily claim, to clothe *it*. *Naked Life, Naked Masks*. The titles of the works themselves are highly significant.

7. – To enjoy Life in its nakedness and infinite freedom, outside all the forms and constructs in which

society, history and the events of each individual existence have channelled its course, is impossible. Mattia Pascal attempted it; by pretending to be dead and changing his name and appearance, he believed he could begin a new life, a life of boundless freedom. He learnt the hard way that, by cutting himself off from all social forms and constructs, he was granted nothing more than the role of a spectator and outsider in the lives of others, with no further possibility of mingling with it or enjoying it in its fullness. Having estranged himself from the forms of Life, it was granted to him only superficially, from the outside. And when, yielding to its call, he deluded himself into thinking he could descend once more into the river of Life and let himself be swept up by its waves, that river cast him out, and he, again at his own expense, learnt that it is not possible to be both alive and dead at the same time; thus, in despair, he resolved to resurrect himself. Too late to take his seat again at the banquet of existence, in time only to see others seated there (cf. the novel *The Late Mattia Pascal*). To estrange oneself from the forms of Life is possible, yes, certainly, but only on condition of renouncing life.

8. – To accept the Forms or constructs into which Life has been constrained, to participate in them, to believe in them, to live them, to feel them and, nevertheless, not to become fixed in a single one or in a single system of them, but rather to preserve within the soul enough fusion or fluidity to allow it to pass from form to form, successively immersing itself in many without becoming definitively fixed in any, without having

fear of the impurities which, in its ceaseless rushing and flowing, it inevitably carries with it, and from which its very ceaseless rushing and flowing frees and purifies it: therein lies the practical wisdom of life. Wisdom that is worth what it is worth and which is far from guaranteeing perfect happiness: for there may always be a form that so firmly blocks the course of the melting soul that the latter cannot melt it with its heat and remains definitively suffocated within it. Such is the case of Corrado Selmi in *The Old and the Young*, in whom Pirandello embodied this ideal of active and fresh wisdom of life, forced to commit suicide on the day that deeds come to light which, not for him who committed them and who was redeemed by the freshness of life he carried within himself and by the good that, in spite of and through those very deeds, spread around him, but to society, which views them from the outside, appear vile and dishonourable.

9. – But the idea of practical wisdom of life that Corrado Selmi embodies can only be realised by a soul which possesses within itself the strength to pass from form to form, without either becoming imprisoned in any one of them, nor losing in the transition the power of vital illusion; by a soul, therefore, which knows how to achieve within itself a balance between Life and Form and to remain content there. But for those who fully embrace Pirandello's insight that every Form is always definition, limitation, determination and therefore negation of Life (*omnis determinatio negatio*), logically only two paths remain open: either (like Vitangelo Moscarda of **One, No One*

One, No One and One Hundred Thousand) to attempt to live Life in all its absolute, primal nakedness, beyond all forms and constructs, focusing on an ephemeral, vibrating, fleeting present, living time moment by moment, without even thinking about it, for to think of it is to construct it, to give it form and, therefore, to limit and stifle it (Bergsonian intuitionism in action, in which *pure duration* is replaced by the *pure*, precise and timeless *present*): and this is an ideal of life that is achievable only in the extreme, that is to say, practically unachievable; or rather,

10. – Having discovered together the provisional nature of Forms, the practical impossibility of doing without them, the inevitability of one day having to pay the price for the Form with which Life has clothed itself or allowed itself to be clothed, and of renouncing Life: this is the case of Don Cosmo Laurentano from **The Old and the Young**. 'There is only one thing that is sad, my dear friends: having understood the game! I mean the game of this mocking little devil, whom each of us harbours within and who delights in presenting to us, as reality, that which, shortly afterwards, he himself reveals to us as our own illusion, mocking us for the troubles we have caused ourselves over it, and mocking us also... for not having been able to deceive us, since outside these illusions there is no other reality... And so do not complain! Strain and torment yourselves, without thinking that all this leads nowhere. If it leads nowhere, it is a sign that it must not lead anywhere, and that it is therefore futile to seek a conclusion. One must live, that is, delude oneself; let the mocking little devil play within us, until he grows weary; and think that everything

this will pass... will pass...' (*The Old and the Young*, II, p. 272). Thus Don Cosmo Laurentano, the solitary philosopher 'whose very appearance exuded the same sentiment that emanates from things which witness impassively the transience of human affairs' (p. 271) comforted the political refugees who had taken shelter in his villa. Renunciation of life can very well be reconciled with a busy and active existence, when, through renunciation, the soul strips itself of all attachment to its individual form, and, having annihilated within itself the principle of individuation—the root of selfishness and sin—lives wholly and solely for others, and is nothing for itself: *this* is the ideal realised by Signora Ponza in **Cosi è* (if you like)*.

11. – To those who lean out to peer into the boundless whirlpool where Life quivers and seethes in its nakedness, to those compelled to silence the voices of social pretence, who, in the silence that has suddenly spread within them, bend down to listen to the gurgling of that mysterious current flowing beneath the bridges of our conceptual constructs, Life appears devoid of purpose and meaning, a mystery that frightens. Nature appears to him as if from an infinite distance, astonished and ghostly, as if absorbed in its own sad, perpetual dream, populated by voices and visions of which man knows or suspects absolutely nothing, indifferent and unaware of the vain fever of the tiny beings swarming on its surface. Whoever, by the very act of having thus reduced it to a whole before them, of having set it as a problem and sought its solution, has detached themselves from Life, can feel nothing more for it

but infinite tedium, subtle and profound anguish. Like Tommasino Unzio in the novella **Canta l'epistola**, Life fills him with both fear and pity. The infinite tenderness for children that led Pirandello—usually a dry, sharp, incisive writer—to pen pages and scenes (in **Pensaci, Giacomino!**, in **La ragione degli altri**) of exquisite sweetness and gentleness, has its roots in a searing pity for Life as it begins and which, unaware and smiling, goes to meet the most atrocious tortures, the most bitter disillusions. In those sweet and gentle words trembles a stifled sob of pity for others and for himself.

12. – Woe betide anyone who, even for a moment, detaches themselves from Life! In their eyes, the banal, good-natured everyday appearance that habit has lent to the things and people with whom they are connected suddenly vanishes: they appear to them as distant, mysterious strangers; their existence or non-existence, their being this way or that, presents itself to them as an inexplicable enigma. He feels oppressed by the stunned immobility of the things around him, of the places where he lives. If a mirror reflects his image, it seems to him to be that of a stranger who takes pleasure in mimicking his gestures and movements, and (like Silia in **The Game of Roles**, Fulvia in **Better Than Before**, Lando Laurentano in **The Old and the Young**, Vitangelo Moscarda in *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*) he is seized by astonishment and dismay that his body must be made precisely like this and not otherwise, with these and these physical characteristics, and ends up feeling indignation and

a sense of nausea as if trapped in an inescapable prison. He feels the dread of blind necessities that cannot be altered: the prison of time; being born now and not before or after; the name and body bestowed upon him; the chain of causes; the seed sown without his will and his coming into the world from that seed; an unwitting fruit, bound to that branch, sprung from those roots. He feels a sense of nausea at his profession, at his condition, at the form he has given to his life; he cannot fathom that the man dressed in such and such a way, who does such and such things, is actually him; he cannot explain why he does them. He speaks, gesticulates, is moved, becomes excited, is restless, and suddenly sees himself through the eyes of a stranger as he speaks, is moved and gesticulates, and for that very reason the vital flame that stirred within him languishes and dies out: and so he either falls silent or, in a fit of rage, to make up for that vital warmth he feels lacking, continues to do coldly what he was doing before, to numb himself, to no longer see himself (Henry IV in the play of the same name, Marco Mauri in *Come prima, meglio di prima*) or (like Marco Mauri) from the most fervent exaltation he suddenly plunges into the tone of the most good-natured and confidential discourse. The fact is that between living and seeing oneself live there is a contrast just as there is between life and death: 'whoever lives, when they live, does not see themselves: they live... If one can see one's own life, it is a sign that one no longer lives it: one endures it, drags it along. Like a dead thing, one drags it along. For every form is a death. Very few know this; most, almost all, struggle, strive to make for themselves, as they say, a status, to attain a form;

having attained it, they believe they have conquered their life, and instead begin to die. They do not know this, because they cannot see themselves; because they can no longer detach themselves from that dying form they have attained; they do not recognise themselves as dead and believe they are alive. One knows only those who manage to see the form they have given themselves or that others have given them—fortune, chance, the circumstances into which each was born. But if we can see this form, it is a sign that our life is no longer within it: for if it were, we would not see it; we would live this form without seeing it, and we would die a little more each day within it—which is in itself a death—without realising it. We can therefore see and know only that part of ourselves which is dead. To know oneself is to die' (cf. the novella *'The Wheelbarrow'*).

13. – In this understanding of the world and of Life, there is no longer any place for the concept of *character* – which underlies contemporary psychological literature – as something compact and homogeneous that unfolds over time through psychological states potentially contained within it as a whole and unfolding from it on a single plane, much like water gushing from a spring and spreading across a perfectly level surface. The individual appears composite and multiform, like a mythological monster (cf. what Leone says to Guido in **The Game of Roles**, Act I, when speaking of his wife Silia).

What we believe to be an individual's stable personality is but one of his indefinite personalities— —which provisionally is succeeded in having the

the upper hand over the others, which either have been and are no longer, or might be and are not yet, but which slumber beneath it, always ready to revolt, to break the yoke, to emerge into the light. Within the depths of every human being lies a formless and contradictory chaos: and the theme of much of Pirandello's work is provided by the apparitions, the deviations, the clashes, the intrusions, the outbursts and the sudden explosions of these latent personalities against the temporarily dominant personality. The psychological life which, in other writers, unfolds according to a slow, uniform, gradual process—and which, even when it enters into drama and conflict, is not in itself, essentially or naturally, drama and conflict—in Pirandello is governed by the law of proceeding through jolts, crashes, leaps and continuous lacerations.

14. – Multifaceted and contradictory in himself, the individual enters into multiplicity and contradiction even in the relationships he maintains with other individuals. Even to them he is not one, he is many, many—this and that and the other ad infinitum—just as the individual with whom he enters into a relationship constructs him, and in the very act of constructing him. The individual, *one* in himself, is *a hundred thousand* to others, which means that in their eyes, he, as he is, is nobody. Mrs Eva Morli is one to her husband—cheerful, carefree, mad—and another to her lover—*a* silent, reserved housewife (*Mrs Morli, one and two*). 'The idea that others saw in me,' says the

the protagonist of **One, No One and One Hundred Thousand** – someone who was not the person I knew myself to be; a man whom only they could know, looking at me from the outside with eyes that were not my own and which gave me an appearance destined to remain forever alien to me, even though it was within me, even though it was mine for them (a *part of me,* therefore, that was not for me!), a life into which, even though it was mine for them, I could not penetrate – this idea gave me no further respite'. And he becomes jealous of the stranger whom, believing she loves him, his wife loves, and in whose arms she enjoys the sweetest delights; he comes to hate the constructs that others have made of him and takes pleasure, through acts that others judge—and must necessarily judge—as mad, in shattering them to pieces.

Every individual is the centre of a world he has built for himself, populated by puppets and ghosts who owe their existence to him alone, of which he is the master and creator, a world into which other individuals enter not in the genuine reality of their being—for this is incommunicable, locked in the frost of an inescapable solitude—but in the construct he has made of them, save, in turn, for him to enter himself as a phantom into the worlds centred on other individuals, to shatter into as many phantasmagorical forms as there are such individuals and the worlds they construct for themselves. Incommunicable in their essence, the constructs that others form of him and the one he forms of himself are perfectly equivalent to one another, which does not prevent each from attempting to force upon others the

world he holds within, as if it were outside, and that everyone must see it in his own way. For there is no reality other than that which we construct as such under the impulse of our feeling, and which is therefore illusion and appearance, and varies from individual to individual, and within the same individual according to feeling or idea. But one cannot live without illusions. And for those who live deeply immersed in the illusion created for them by their feelings, that illusory world is as real as the most solid so-called 'real' reality. And precisely because feelings vary from individual to individual and within the same individual as time passes, the illusory world arising from those feelings varies, and all these worlds exist side by side, incommunicable and equivalent.

15. – For each person, what appears to them is, in the act and manner of its appearing. *Esse est percipi*. This is the theme that Pirandello explores with a playful tone in one of his most perfect plays: *Così è (se vi pare)*. The fundamental inspiration comes from Baldovino's thesis in **The Pleasure of Honesty**: 'Descartes, scrutinising our consciousness of reality, had one of the most terrifying thoughts ever to cross the human mind: namely, that if dreams were *regular*, we would no longer be able to distinguish dreams from waking life. Have you ever felt that strange unease when a dream recurs several times? – It becomes almost impossible to doubt that we are not facing reality. For all our knowledge of the world hangs by this very fine thread: the re-go-la-ri-ty of our experiences' (Act I).

Now, on the basis of this criterion, how can we judge whether what Mr Ponza says is true or whether, on the contrary, his mother-in-law, Mrs Frola, is right? She maintains that her son-in-law is, or at least was, mad, since he believes that his current wife is a second wife, married a few years after the death of his first wife, Mrs Frola's daughter. Mr Ponza, on the other hand, maintains that it is his mother-in-law who is mad, as she believes his second wife to be her daughter, who is still alive; hence the necessity he finds himself in, to maintain the illusion that keeps the poor old woman alive, by preventing the two women from having any contact with one another. Each of the two speaks, apparently, with complete reasonableness and appears convinced of the truth of what he says: the world he has constructed is orderly and coherent, and within it everything is explained and linked together. Faced with these two incommunicable and opposing worlds, how is one to decide between them? The gossipy and cruel curiosity of the provincial townspeople, whom this strange affair has set ablaze with excitement and who, in their eagerness to unravel the mystery, do not hesitate to inflict the most atrocious moral torments on the two unhappy souls, is portrayed by Pirandello with rare perfection and lightness. But this curiosity is destined to remain unsatisfied: the documents that might solve the enigma have vanished. It is decided to question Mrs Ponza, and she appears veiled and replies: 'The truth: it is only this: that I am, yes, the daughter of Mrs Frola, – and the second wife of Mr Ponza; yes, and for me, none! none!... For me, I am the one they believe me to be!' (Act

III, final scene). If, with this play, Pirandello (as is crudely interpreted by most) had seriously intended to demonstrate the philosophical truth of the principle '*to be is to appear*', he would have faced, in addition to the objection already raised, the further one that such a universal and metaphysical truth cannot be demonstrated through the most extraordinary combination and complication of circumstances and adventures. But this admirable play is meant to be nothing more than a joke, a mockery of the blind and rigid dogmatism of the masses, who believe in truth as something already beautiful and given outside the mind, of which the mind need only take note and on which, should any doubt arise, a duly legalised death certificate suffices to shed light. Pirandello mocks this rigid dogmatism through the words of Laudisi, who realises that even the discovery of the documents would solve nothing, for the protagonists have nullified those documents within themselves, in their very souls. The focus of the play is not so much the conflict between Mrs Frola and Mr Ponza, who remain and must necessarily remain shadowy and mysterious figures, but rather that between the onlookers—who want one or the other to be in the wrong and desperately hunt for the document that will free them from doubt—and Laudisi, who finds fault with and agrees with both of them and mocks the onlookers (and the audience). It is a philosophical farce: and, within the genre, a true masterpiece.

16. – Not only in the deepest reality do individuals remain incommunicable like monads without doors or

windows through which to trade: within each individual, every act of life is unique and incommunicable: alive, and therefore, for the individual experiencing it, true and certain in the very moment it takes place; yet as soon as Life has moved on and the individual reflects on it, it appears impenetrable and opaque, cold and obscure; he no longer finds himself there nor recognises himself in it; he no longer feels it as his own. It is, in a grotesque form, the case of Memmo Speranza in **Ma non è una cosa seria**; of Memmo who falls in love with frightening ease, catches fire like a match, promises eternal faith and love, then, after a while, wakes from his intoxication and finds himself engaged, bound for life to a moment of life he has now left behind and in which he no longer recognises himself. Hence the sorrows, quarrels and duels; to escape these and the danger of making fresh promises and becoming entangled again for the future, Memmo marries Gasparina, a poor devil of a servant-girl, marrying her in jest so that he will no longer run the risk of marrying her in earnest.

The same motif, this time tragically, is developed in the *short* stories **The Doctor's Duty**, **How Cirinciò Forgot for a Moment That He Was Himself**, *and *The Whirlpool**, the latter of which tells how a certain man, one day, suddenly, for five minutes, became another man—who shared with the first only his physical appearance—and became the lover of his wife's friend, who too had been suddenly transformed; then, immediately, both returned to being who they were before, with no memory, and therefore no

remorse for what had happened. Deeply in love with his wife, he begins to think that what happened to him might very well have happened to her too, that she might harbour within herself, without remorse, and therefore without a trace and without a lie, a similar secret, and he goes mad.
And it is not merely a single act of life that, once experienced, may appear to the individual as impenetrable, obscure, alien, *not his own*, but the entire past, the whole life that individual has lived prior to a certain moment when he suddenly became a stranger to himself: a theme wonderfully developed in the short stories *'The Wheelbarrow'* and *'By Himself'*.
17. – Thus an unfathomable abyss yawns between the present and the past. Conversely, it may happen that the present—the act of life that felt and believed itself to be present—when confronted with a situation entirely different from what was imagined, realises that it is perceived as such by others, and suddenly becomes, for itself, no longer present but past, feeling itself abruptly cast back into the cold realm of things that were.
This is the central theme of **Lumie di Sicilia**. Micuccio Bonavino, a band musician, sets off from his small Sicilian village to travel to a distant city to marry Teresina, the fiancée whom he had sent to study singing – sacrificing his own livelihood to do so – and whom he has not seen for years, yet whom he still considers his betrothed. Teresina has become a great singer and Micuccio knows it, but he does not believe that this is why she will refuse to marry him, a poor

piccolo player. The thing is, to him Teresina is still the girl who used to sing at the top of her voice in the attic of their little house in their native village: he cannot imagine her any other way; to him, she has remained frozen in time. The day he sees what she has become—low-cut, dressed in the latest fashion, surrounded by admirers—he will understand and suddenly feel that he is nothing more to her than a distant, forgotten, shameful past: 'While I… there… remained… with my piccolo… in the village square… she… she so far away… But what! Not even to think of it anymore…'.

This is the final motif of *The Late Mattia Pascal*. He too, two years after his presumed death, decides to return to life and go back to his native village to resume his former life. Except that the living have not waited for him and have settled into life as if he were not there, and all that remains for him is to be a stranger in his own village too, a spectator, a shadow that watches, smiles and passes by. For him, too, it is now too late to live.

This is the theme, heightened this time in tragic form, of *Henry IV*.

The first ideal moment of the tragedy.

One day, a gentleman, prone to fixation, takes part in a masquerade dressed as Henry IV of Germany; he falls from his horse, strikes his head on the ground, and rises up mad, truly believing himself to be Henry

IV. His relatives take him to a villa where, dressed as Henry IV, surrounded by paid young men in disguise as

Like a feudal lord of the eleventh century, he carries on with his harmless madness. Around him, the river of time rushes swiftly, sweeping everything before it: the woman he loved marries, has a daughter, takes as her lover the man who was her most detested rival; both of them, and with them all the companions of the famous masquerade, enjoy and suffer life and gradually grow grey and old: he remains Henry IV, hooked, nailed to that vibration of life he had wished to experience for a single evening. For a single evening he had wished to grant himself the pleasure of a form so far removed from the usual and normal form of his life: a cruel fate decreed that he should remain trapped within it. He is thus excluded from Life: for he does not truly live even as Henry IV. As Henry IV he is always twenty-six years old, the mask he assumed being precisely that of the twenty-six-year-old emperor. In the villa where he spends his wretched life as a madman, a portrait has been hung on the wall depicting him as he was dressed on that fateful evening: that portrait is for him like an image reflected in a mirror, in which he sees himself frozen in perpetual youth, exiled from Life that evolves, that flows, that changes.

The second pivotal moment of the tragedy.

Twelve years pass. One day the masked man awakens from his sad dream: Life, frozen for so many years in the chill of madness, begins to flow through him once more. Away with those clothes, enough of that carnival, down into Life, into full and true Life!... To do what? In what world will he

find himself? In a world no longer his own, which he will no longer recognise, where people have walked so far and so long that, however fast he runs, he will never catch up with them. At the banquet of existence there is no longer a place for him: all consumed, all cleared away! All that remains for him is to continue, consciously, willingly, coldly, that pretence which for so many years he had lived as reality; to continue to play, with the awareness of playing it, the part which, without asking his permission, fate had imposed upon him to play. After all, do not all men play a part in life? He will play his part with the full awareness that he is doing so, and this will be his revenge on Life, which sought to exclude him: he, the supposed madman, will force all those who come to visit him to put on a mask, turn them into a host of clowns, and in this sad carnival of life, at least play the part of the emperor. Has Life mocked him? Then he, in turn, will mock Life! For twelve years he has been nailed to a form of Life that was meant to be fleeting, and now is it too late to live the Life that is just beginning? Well then, he will make himself a citizen of that glassy realm of the immobile, of the already done, of the already become, into which he had been involuntarily cast. Sad are the circumstances, horrendous the life of Henry IV, but at least it is already defined, concluded, determined in all its details, frozen in the eternal immobility of the past which is what it is and changes no more, and which therefore can no longer offer

, eternally removed from the fever of Life that is coming into being for the first time.

The third pivotal moment of the tragedy: from this extreme dualism of Life and Form, a bolt of lightning strikes. For twenty years, first unwittingly, then by choice, the masked man has been frozen in the role of the twenty-six-year-old Henry IV. And suddenly, in the guise of his former companions who come to visit him, Life—his very own life—reveals itself to him as it is now, after twenty years have passed. The first clash between the immutable Form and Life, which changes, which flows. And looking into the faces of his visitors, the masked man has a vivid sense of the twenty years that have passed and which he has not lived. And yet, he still has the strength to continue the pretence, and allows himself the savage joy of turning them around as he pleases, these unwitting souls who have come to make him feel first-hand the twenty years that they, and not he, have enjoyed. But left alone with the four who act as his advisers, he bursts out and throws the mask to the ground. He wants to put it back on. He cannot. He has been betrayed; the ruse is exposed. With even greater recklessness than before, the visitors tear the mask from his face; they want to take him back with them, into a life that can no longer be his, but theirs alone. And yet there it is, that life before his very eyes: the woman he loved, with her dyed hair and her forty years; her daughter, a living portrait of her mother, dressed just like her on that famous carnival evening; and between them, the twenty years of his exile. It is the time *that has not passed for him,* made visible

before his eyes. And he throws himself at the young girl to seize her and take her with him: only from there can he truly begin to live, for twenty years he has remained frozen there, where twenty years earlier Matilde was and where her daughter Frida is now. They hold him back and he, in a rage, kills the man who, having stolen his mother from him, now seeks to take his daughter away. And so all that remains for him is to remain frozen forever in the mask of Enrico
IV. Having stepped out of his role, having returned for a moment to true and real Life, he is immediately expelled from it. The struggle between Life and Form ends with the decisive defeat of Life.
The beauty *of *Henry IV** lies in the extreme, almost homely simplicity of its language – broken, jagged and fragmented – and in the cosmic resonance of what the characters say. They speak anxiously, convulsively, without choosing their words, and behind them we see the metaphysical spectres of Life and Form rising up, the categories of our intellect taking shape on stage; we hear the ineffable torment of a life that was prevented from living; we perceive, almost tangibly, the silent, infinite passing of time and of Life. And the architecture of the tragedy is such that the key moments of its development—which we have analysed at length and which span a period of twenty years—pass before our eyes in a relentless and dizzying succession of scenes, bound together by a powerful and profound logic. *Henry IV*: a tragedy of Life that could not live, strangled by a Form that was meant to be ephemeral and which, instead, swallowed it whole,

leaving no escape.

18. – The tragedy of Henry IV is the tragedy of Life in exemplary form, such indeed being the tragedy of Life for Pirandello: having to necessarily give itself Form and yet being unable to be content with it, for always, sooner or later, Life pays the price for the Form it has given itself or allowed to be given. The heart of Pirandello's drama lies here: in this clash between Life and the Form into which the individual has channelled it, or into which others have channelled it for him. Pirandello chooses his characters from the common fabric of Life, the least heroic, the most conventional and ordinary possible: office workers, professionals, teachers, shopkeepers, petty bourgeois. He chooses them, that is, from the class in which the concern for rules, conventions, forms, pretences, appearances and social masks is most acute. He gives them an ungainly or unhappy physique, with some peculiarity of the face or body, or some repugnant, unpleasant or curious *tic*. He places them in the most banal and petty-bourgeois settings imaginable. And, through a slow, meticulous, dry, arid, thankless build-up, consisting of seemingly disordered and confused *remarks*, from which, little by little, through a series of more or less indirect hints, the story begins to take shape, he leads them to the moment when a violent conflict arises between their vital spontaneity and the mask they had either voluntarily donned or allowed to be placed upon their faces, or when, appearing as if in

a mirror of the image others have formed of them; they do not recognise themselves in it and are overcome with pain and horror as they say to themselves: *'This is me!'* Then those characters who had presented themselves to us as stiff, hard, wooden, and lifeless as puppets—because they had been cast in a pre-determined mould—laugh and weep and sob, trembling and convulsive: this time they live, living in complete abandonment to their spontaneity, disdainful or oblivious to the mask they had placed or allowed to be placed upon their faces. And even if, in the end, they put it back on, it is only to hide their dark torment beneath it. All of Pirandello's theatre, to which the writer's vast body of work aspires and in which it culminates, is nothing but an infinite variation on this fundamental theme. The usual and normal relationships of life are negated. In their place, other, different and inverted relationships. And just as ordinary relationships are, or appear to be, through habit, straightforward, plausible and easy, so the relationships that replace them are, or appear to be, implausible, artificial, complicated, baroque, held together with difficulty and by force.

19. – The opposition between the individual and the concept or construct others have formed of him. It is the drama of *the Father* in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The events of life decreed that the *Stepdaughter* should catch him in a dubious house, in an act in which, according to the normal relationships of existence, she should never have been able to see him: in all his misery as poor, unsatisfied human flesh. Now, for the

Stepdaughter, he has remained there, hooked, nailed for eternity to that moment of life. And in vain does he protest that no, that it is unfair to judge him by that single act alone, as if he were entirely contained within it, summed up and reduced to it, leaving no residue! The girl can see him only as she saw him in that infamous house, nailed for eternity to that moment of life, like a statue eternally frozen in the pose the artist gave it: 'Do you understand the treachery of this girl? She caught me in a place, in an act, where and how she ought not to have known me, as I could not have been for her, and she wants to impose upon me a reality which I could never have expected to assume for her, in a fleeting, shameful moment of my life!' (Act I).

This is the story of State Councillor Martino Lori (in **Tutto per bene**), an inconsolable widower who, for sixteen years, has visited the cemetery every day to mourn his beloved Silvia, who has passed away; meanwhile, his daughter Palma grows up under the care of his friend Salvo Manfroni, who loves her and treats her as his own daughter, provides her with a dowry and finds her an excellent match: a thoughtfulness that Lori attributes not only to Manfroni's sincere friendship towards him, but also to the desire to make amends for his misappropriation of the ideas contained in an unpublished manuscript by Silvia's father, a great scientist who died young. Except that one fine day, by a most trivial of coincidences, this whole construct crumbles and Martino Lori suddenly finds himself confronted with the image others had formed of him: namely,

he had been a complacent husband who, to further his career, had pretended to be unaware that Silvia was Salvo's lover and that Palma was his daughter, and, upon his wife's death, had coldly continued the charade of the inconsolable widower. And reflecting on the view others had of him, Lori shudders with nausea and horror: 'Did you really think me capable of this? To the point of going there every day [to the cemetery] to perform that charade?... But what a vile creature have I been in your eyes?' Vile and incompetent, for what was a sincere feeling for him was, to others, a charade he was performing—and performing badly: badly, because the wretch did not realise he was performing it. His whole world crumbles from its foundations: 'Everything turned upside down; turned on its head. Yes. The world that suddenly presents itself to you anew, as you had never even dreamed of seeing it. I open my eyes now!' (Act III).

This is the tragedy of Fulvia in **Come prima, meglio di prima**: Fulvia, corrupted and spoiled by her husband Silvio, runs away from home, sinks into the most vile degradation, and finally, sickened by the filth, attempts suicide. Her husband, rushing to her deathbed almost against his will, saves her (he is a great surgeon); once she is cured, he makes her a mother and brings her back home, driven partly by remorse for the harm he has done her and partly by a sensual desire for the former thrills. But since their daughter Livia, now grown up, has been told that her mother, a saint, is dead, Fulvia will be accepted as Silvio's second wife. And Fulvia, purified and redeemed by her new motherhood, seeing herself reflected in the image that has been

, sees herself as a vulgar adventuress skilled in the arts of the most cunning seduction, who has usurped the place held by Livia's mother, the saint, who passed away too soon. And the ghost of Fulvia the saint, which Livia has constructed for herself, stands against the Fulvia of flesh and blood to bar the door to her daughter's heart. Against this image of herself that Livia has created—a shadow, a lie turned into reality—Fulvia feels a tremendous hatred, which kills in her every sense of motherhood towards Livia. Livia appears to her not as her own daughter, but as the daughter of the dead woman: her true daughter will be only the unborn child. 'To her [Livia] I am *this*, and I *cannot be her mother*. I have reached the point of believing it myself! It seems to me, it truly seems to me, that she is *the daughter of that other woman*... The shadow, turned into reality! And what a reality! It has truly killed my maternal instinct for her within me! Now more than ever, as I feel it alive within me for another' (Act II). Therefore, when in her blind hatred of the woman she believes to be an intruder, Livia insults the little creature, Fulvia cannot resist the pleasure of dragging Livia's idol through the mud and shouts at the girl that the saint she believes herself to be the daughter of was a harlot—herself, the hated and despised Fulvia. And she leaves the house, taking the newborn with her, the only one she now feels is her daughter.

This is the theme, presented in a playful manner, of the play within a play (in *Capiddazzu paga tuttu*) that Don Nzulu performs, placing the corresponding mask before the eyes of each of the relatives and friends ('One by one I'll play the part of everyone! I'll put you all in your place!').

'Look in the mirror!' (Act III, Scene I): upon recognising one another, each one shudders and protests; yet they find themselves together, and, in the end, through the masked ball, each ends up donning the mask that is their due.

20. – Woe betide anyone who destroys the mask that an individual has voluntarily placed upon their face, the role they have assigned themselves in life! Ciampa (in **The Rattlecap**) has constructed for himself the mask of a respectable husband: in his heart he knows full well that he is not one, and that his wife is his master's mistress, and that he allows it to happen out of weakness and an invincible attachment to that woman who has bewitched him; but since all appearances are preserved, he demands that others respect in him the mask he has placed upon his face. Believing him to be in on it, and to vent her own mad fit of jealousy, his master's wife, Beatrice, has the lovers caught in the act. They are not caught red-handed, but the damage is done: everyone will say that Ciampa is a cuckold. Beatrice has torn from his face the mask he had donned, telling *everyone* without the slightest regard what she alone thought of him. And so it comes down to one of two things: either Ciampa, however much his blood runs cold, will kill the adulterers (in a similar circumstance, the protagonist of the novella **La verità* uccide la moglie* does just that), or, if what is said of him is true—namely, that the scandal was caused by madness—he must prove that the accuser is mad and have her committed to an asylum. There is no other way to save the *image* he has built up of himself and which he wants to be respected. 'In private, no one is satisfied with his role: each, standing

in front of his own puppet, would perhaps spit in his face. But not from the others; from the others he wants him respected' (Act I, Scene IV). And Beatrice, for whom the prospect of the asylum is truly about to drive her mad, is forced to leave for the sanatorium. The tragedy is thus averted.

It erupts, however, when (*in Henry IV*) the Marquise Matilde Spina and others tear from the face of *the Great Masked Man* the mask of Henry IV, which he had continued to don voluntarily and consciously for the reasons stated above, and shout at him that he is cured, that he is feigning, and they wish to take him away, to bring him back into Life, into a life that is no longer, can no longer be his.

It is also the tragedy of Ersilia Drei, the protagonist of **Vestire gli ignudi**. Reduced to the very depths of human misery, she poisons herself. Carried to hospital on the brink of death, whose life had never been able to consist of anything, who had never been able to clothe herself in a guise that was not immediately torn to shreds by the many dogs that were always jumping on her, that was not sullied by all the basest and most vile miseries, wants to put on a pretty face for death, and invents a little story to draw everyone's lamentations upon her corpse. But they save her by force; Life takes her back, tears away the noble mask, the fine garment she had fashioned for herself, and reveals her in her deformed nakedness. And all that remains for Ersilia is to take her own life once more (this time for real) to earn the right to be believed when she claimed that, if

she lied, it was not to live but to die.

This is the tragedy of Anna, the protagonist of **The Life I Gave You**. Having been separated from her son for many years, she has formed an image of him, a form, which she keeps alive and present in her heart, and which she has no doubt is one and the same as his actual, tangible reality. And Life strikes and assaults that form for the first time: upon her son's return, Anna realises that there is almost nothing in common between him and the image she had cherished of him. And then her son dies suddenly: Life's second collision with Form. Anna refuses to accept his death: he will continue to live for her the very same life he lived whilst he was far from her, a life that so little coincided with the life he actually led at the time. Death has destroyed her son's body, but had he not already been a stranger to her for years? Her son will truly begin to die for Anna on the day when (the third clash of Life against Form) his beloved, Lucia, learns of his passing, and breaks down in desperate tears: in that wave of weeping, Anna feels the solidity of the structure she had built for herself vanish. The catastrophe is complete when Lucia confesses to her that she has been made a mother by her son: he, as Anna remembers him, as she wanted to save him from death, will now live on, no longer in the image her mother has of him, but in the child who will be born of Lucia; the mother will no longer be Anna, but Lucia. Anna had sought to snatch a form from the flow of Life that is ever renewing itself; and Life, immobilised for a moment, soon resumes its endless

endless flow, dissolving and liquefying the rigid form in which it had been sought to be arrested.

21. – Sometimes the mask that an individual wears on his face is the one that society has forced upon him, and in vain has the wretch rebelled and begged for mercy: in the end, he has had to bow his head and submit to it. Such is the case of Chiarchiaro in **La Patente**. The poor man, who was initially branded a jinx, protested, rebelled, and begged for mercy: in the end, having fled, isolated like a leper, reduced to the depths of misery and despair, he has no other escape but to accept the role imposed upon him with such ruthless ferocity. He will exercise the profession of jinx-caster with savage joy, blackmailing people with the terror of his ominous power. And perhaps he really does possess this power:

'for I have accumulated so much bile and so much hatred, I, against all this wretched humanity, that I truly believe, Your Honour, that I have here, in these eyes, the power to bring an entire city crashing down to its foundations!'

22. – But sometimes it is the individual himself who, of his own free will, consciously and dispassionately, has chosen and assigned himself the role: thus Henry IV, when, having come to his senses, he realises the folly of the past and decides to continue it dispassionately; thus Leone Gala, in **The Game of Roles**. In Leone Gala, reason has triumphed over instinct, passion and emotion; he has emptied himself of life and watches it unfold within himself and in others, whose actions and movements he foresees – and by the very act of foreseeing them, he robs them of their pleasure – his sole pleasure is to see himself and others

living. But so as not to lose his balance and fall to the ground, he clings to a pivot from time to time, assigns himself a role, and does not move from there: thus, deliberately, he is the puppet of himself. As regards his wife Silia, from whom he lives apart, he has assigned himself the role of husband in the eyes of the law, and that is all. Silia is his opposite: a sensuous, amoral madwoman, a brute and irrational instinct; she hates Leone, has nightmares about him, feels oppressed and paralysed by him, and wishes for his death. To harm him, she, in agreement with her lover Guido, puts him in a position to challenge a gentleman from whom he has suffered a grave affront. He accepts the challenge, since no one but her husband could do so; he allows the lover, who acts as his second, to set terrible conditions in the hope that, unable to fight against the highly skilled fencer, he will lose his life; but when the time comes to fight, he refuses, and allows his second, the lover, to go in his place, as chivalric rules dictate. His role is to issue the challenge; the lover's, to fight. *A role reversal*. And in the duel, the lover is killed.

23. – But whether in the long run or immediately, the spontaneity of the vital instinct rises up against the conceptual constructs within which the individual has voluntarily shut himself away, against the role he has assigned himself, against the mask he has placed upon his face.

The uprising of Life against Form can be immediate. This is the theme *of the fable 'The Man, the Beast and Virtue*', in which Pirandello's entire vision of life

appears grotesquely and puppet-like in its distortion.

Perrella is a seasoned sea captain who, in order to avoid giving his only son – whom he had with his lawful wife – a little brother, seizes on the slightest pretext to fly into a rage whenever, after three or four months at sea, he comes ashore and goes home; he locks himself in his room and the next day slips away without saying goodbye, having failed to fulfil his duties as a husband. This has been going on for three years. Perrella's son's teacher, Paolino, moved by the lady's undeserved suffering, has offered to comfort her. The result is that in seven months' time the lady will give Nonò a little brother. It is therefore necessary, to avoid a scandal, that during the twenty-four hours the captain is at home, he should be a husband to his wife not only in name but also in deed. Thus, armed with an aphrodisiac pie, Paolino goes to the Perrella household to witness the arrival of the beast and await events. To hasten matters, he compels Mrs Perrella to low her neckline, apply carmine to her lips and rouge to her cheeks, in the hope that her ostentatious charms will make an impression on the captain. And so here is Paolino, all frankness and open, brutal loyalty, compelled by the necessities of life not only to conceal the reality of who he is from Mrs Perrella, but, indeed, to devise—he, her passionate lover—a whole diabolical plan to lure that vile beast of a husband back into the marital bed. Poor Paolino could not put on

mask more at odds with the features the good Lord gave him, and that is why he trembles, screams and grits his teeth in a paroxysm of fury that is always on the verge of bursting and ruining everything. The incongruity of the mask on his face is heightened by the fact that not for a single moment does Paolino view his situation through the eyes of a normal man—that is, as an annoying, yet, all things considered, rather ridiculous and amusing, entanglement. No! He is convinced that he is living through a tragic tangle of events: for him, Mrs Perrella is not just another woman who, neglected by her husband, has found a comforter and is now trying to make the best of the consequences of her misstep: she is a saint; he, Paolino, is not a lover like any other, who, having done wrong, fears the consequences and tries to hide his cowardice from himself and others under the guise of defending his lover's honour: he is a martyr, and the scheme he devises to persuade Perrella to fulfil his wifely duty is sublime proof of his love. For himself, Paolino lives through a tragedy where the Author sees nothing but a farce, and so he writhes, roars, and rages: ridiculous outbursts that yet do not make one laugh, for in Paolino Pirandello mocks all of humanity, which, even when it believes itself to be the heroine of a tragedy, is the protagonist of a lamentable farce. Thus, in this fable (the name is significant), laughter conceals a profound suffering, an invincible bitterness, which robs it of all sweetness and serenity. But—and here lies the work's shortcoming—after the first act

only a few fleeting hints point to a universally human meaning beyond the farcical plot and remind us that this is an apologue and not a mere *farce*. In the second and third acts, with all the interest of the action reduced to whether or not the *beast* will eat the pie and whether or not this will have an effect, *the apologue* turns into *a farce*.

The rebellion of Life against the Form into which it has been forced may not be immediate. In order to escape a life of dissipation and debauchery and to create a situation in which (as the husband of a respectable lady) he is compelled by her to live honestly, Baldovino, the protagonist of **The Pleasure of Honesty**, marries Agata, whom Fabio has made a mother and whom he cannot marry because he is already married. But he makes his position clear from the outset: if he is *honest*, everyone must be honest! Agata and Fabio may well continue to love one another, if they wish, but they must strictly respect him—not Baldovino, but the honest husband of a respectable lady—and scrupulously maintain appearances, not only in front of others, but in front of him himself. Thus, if any wrongdoing occurs, he will not be the one to commit it; they will. In this way, Baldovino constructs for himself a perfect integrity, and lives no longer as a man, but as an artificial and constructed form of integrity. The immediate effect of Baldovino's integrity is Agata's own formal integrity: not wishing to deceive him, she breaks off all contact with Fabio. She can no longer be Fabio's unless Baldovino leaves the house first. Fabio weaves a web to induce Baldovino to commit a theft: he will then

disgrace him and drive him from the house. But Baldovino, having discovered the deception, agrees to be made out to be a thief and to leave, on condition that it is not he but Fabio who steals. Later, however, it is he himself who voluntarily puts himself in a position to be seen as a thief: he has realised he loves Agata, and this love, by placing him before her as man to woman, and no longer as the mask of a husband against the mask of a wife, makes him understand the need to leave. Love kills the mask of the husband within him. But Agata, who also loves him, will follow him even as a thief. So he stays. The form of honesty has killed the lover in Agata and created the wife within her, in earnest and not in jest. Life has reduced to ashes the Form into which she had been forced and has created a new and superior one.

In *Come prima meglio di prima*, the Form that is reduced to ashes is, on the contrary, precisely that superior and purer one. Fulvia, in the long run, can no longer bear the unnatural pretence she has imposed upon herself; she casts aside the mask of her husband's virtuous wife and returns, in the company of the mad Marco Mauri, to the carefree, vagabond life of before.

Memmo Speranza, the hero of **Ma non è una cosa seria**, marries Gasparina as a joke to protect himself from the danger of actually getting married. As a marriage, his isn't serious: it's serious as a preventive measure against marriage. Poor Gasparina accepts this bizarre marriage because she takes on no obligations whatsoever, because she has nothing to lose, and because she needs a bit of breathing space in the hellish life she

led so far. Both are being rational. They assign themselves a role. A triumph of logic. But Life mocks *logic*. In the little villa that Memmo has given her, Gasparina rests, regains her strength, and blossoms anew. She falls in love with Memmo, and love awakens in her a sense of dignity. She can no longer continue playing a role in which Memmo only notices her to curse her, that is, when she acts as an obstacle to a serious marriage. She therefore offers to give Memmo his freedom back by annulling the marriage that was never consummated. But on seeing her young and beautiful, on realising she is pure, Memmo falls in love with her too, and the marriage of jest becomes a marriage in earnest. A triumph of vital spontaneity, of folly, of the irrational.

24. – Irrationality which, mind you, appears as such only in comparison to what we usually call reason. In itself, it is reason; it too is logic. What we call reason is but one of many forms, one of many possible reasons, which certainly has the right to exist and assert itself, but is wrong when it seeks to deny the possibility and the right of other forms, of other reasons. Some of Pirandello's plays are a living demonstration of this logic of the irrational: **L'innesto** (*The Graft*), for example.

Married for seven years, Laura and Giorgio love each other with the unconditional devotion of their very being. But no child has come to bless their union: Laura, therefore, is not for Giorgio the mother of his children,

but only the woman he violently desires and loves. Therefore, on the day Laura falls victim to the violence of a brute, Giorgio feels his love struck at the very root of his being. Laura has belonged to another: another has possessed that body which was meant to be the treasure and delight of his kisses. Laura, of course, is not to blame for the outrage: the misfortune that has befallen her makes her worthy of compassion; but, precisely, Giorgio's pain is made all the more acute by the duty of pity imposed upon him. The fact that the most brutal offence has been committed against her through no fault of her own wounds not honour, but love, and all the more so the greater the obligation placed upon love to show pity. It is unreasonable, yet it is logical. It is the logic of love. But this very logic then dictates that when Giorgio, who is about to flee, sees Laura appear before him, silent and sorrowful, he should take her into his arms, weeping, in a surge of love that their shared misfortune renders more intimate and sweet, more profound and, even amidst the terrible bitterness, gentle. We find them a few months later in a villa where, after the storm, they have sheltered the renewed springtime of their love. An old gardener explains to Laura how the grafting of plants takes place. For the grafted plant to bear fruit, it is necessary that it underwent grafting whilst it was in sap, that is, when, like a woman in love, it desired and yearned for the fruit which, by its own strength alone, it could not produce. And Laura, who feels within herself the first stirrings of a new life, which with almost absolute certainty comes from her rapist, applies to herself what the gardener has told her. That

matters where the seed came from, if she has absorbed that seed and made it her own to the extent that her whole being was love, and if there was love, was it not solely for Giorgio? If a child is born, it will therefore be Giorgio's. Unreasonableness, madness, Laura herself acknowledges this, when Giorgio, reasoning from the standpoint of common logic, demands the destruction of the seed, but a madness that lifts her up, exalts her, and which, in its generous whirlpool, ends up overwhelming Giorgio himself. 'And so, what more do you want, if you believe in my love? There is nothing else in me! Can't you feel it?' And Giorgio: 'Yes, yes...' (Act III, final scene). Once again, the logic of the irrational triumphs.

And it triumphs in the most spectacular fashion thanks to Professor Toti, an elderly secondary school teacher and the protagonist of **Pensaci, Giacomino!**. He marries to spite the government, which has always kept him on a shoestring, and thus, after his death, he will force it to pay a widow's pension. Since she is young, the pension will be paid out for a longer period. Will his young wife betray him? He accepts marital infidelity in advance: this will ensure peace in the family. After all, it will not be he, Professor Agostino Toti, who will be the one betrayed—he will merely act as a father and benefactor to his young wife—but the husband whom, in reality, he *will not be* for himself. A construction that, from the point of view of common logic, is absurd, mad and irrational, yet internally coherent, harmonious and, therefore, highly rational. And indeed, Toti marries Lillina, who has already become a mother to Giacomino. This followed to be

his lover, Toti knows this, acts as a father to the two young people, as a grandfather to the child whom the law recognises as his own, and secures a good position for Giacomino. The old professor, who has never known such things, thus experiences the joys of family life in his twilight years. People laugh and are scandalised: he couldn't care less. And when Giacomino, no longer feeling the strength to endure such a paradoxical situation, abandons Lillina and the little one and gets engaged to return to a proper life and set up his own home, he, with the most tender pleas and the most violent threats, forces him to return to poor Lillina who loves him so much. The logic of the irrational reaches its peak in this extraordinary work, in which we see a husband forcing his wife's lover to return to the abandoned woman and, what is more, having a reason to act in this way. Never had the relativity of human constructs, the existence of a right and a reason which, when set against common right and common reason, appear—and must appear—absurd and mad, been upheld with more bitter, more open, more lucidly logical violence.

25. – Precisely because in Pirandello's vision of the world there is not one reason, one logic, one right, but as many as there are individuals, and for the same individual as many as feeling creates in its infinite variations, each character, from their particular point of view, is right, and there is no single, higher point of view from which to judge all the others. Thus, ultimately, Pirandello does not judge and does not acquit or

He does not condemn any of his characters: rather, his judgement is implicit in the way he portrays them and the consequences of their actions. His moral outlook is strictly immanentist, with any reference to transcendent norms entirely absent. For each character, judgement is rendered implicitly by the fruits of their actions. Thus, for example, not once does a word of condemnation pass Pirandello's lips regarding any of the many women he portrays, almost all of whom, as they are personifications of the blind and unbridled instinct on this side of reason and thought, appear as neurotic, hysterical, mad, amoral, reckless creatures, intoxicated by sensual cerebralism and who, having sated themselves, feel nausea and horror, with sudden longings for purity and motherhood. Such as Silia in **The Game of Roles**, Beatrice in **The Rattlecap**, Fulvia in **As Before, Better Than Before**, the *Stepdaughter* in **Six Characters in Search of an* Author*, the *Murdered Woman* in *the profane mystery *At the* Exit*, Ersilia in **Clothing the* Naked*—all filled with hatred for the man standing before them (respectively Leone, Ciampa, Silvio, the Father, the fat man) and who embodies everything that is directly opposed to them: order, reason, reflection, and prudent, measured calm.

26. – In Pirandello's vision of the world, it is essential for Life to take on Form and yet not be exhausted by it; and, in the human world, the creator of Form is thought. Thus, whilst in other artists reflection, consciousness and thought do indeed accompany the unfolding of events

, they do so from the outside, casting a cold, superficial light upon them, so that the drama is generated and consumed exclusively within the sphere of affectivity, passion and feeling; and even if thought intervenes, it is not the element that generates the drama. In Pirandello, however, thought is woven into the psychological unfolding moment by moment. His characters justify, condemn, and criticise themselves; they reflect upon themselves in the very act of living, suffering, and tormenting themselves. They do not merely feel, but reason or ramble about their feelings, and by reasoning or rambling over them, they alter them, transferring them from the realm of mere emotion to a realm of greater complexity and truer humanity—for man is not only feeling, but also, and above all, thought, and if it is true that he reasons or rambles on especially when he suffers. Feelings, passions, affections: thought always projects them before itself, colours them with itself, imbues them with itself; but precisely for that reason, it too is in turn coloured by them and warmed by their flame. Here, thought is life and drama, and unfolds step by step through incessant lacerations and contrasts. Intellectuality, certainly, but an intellectuality that is drama, torment and passion. Thinking thought, which is an activity that explains itself through continuous and incessant dramas, contrasts and lacerations, stands at the centre of the artistic world: with Pirandello, dialectic becomes poetry.

27. – Pirandello's art, contemporary not only chronologically but also ideologically to the great spiritualist and idealist revolution that took place in Italy

and in Europe at the turn of the century, he brought into art that anti-intellectualism, that anti-rationalism, that anti-logicism which pervades all contemporary philosophy and which today culminates in Relativism. Pirandello's art is anti-intellectual not because it denies or ignores thought in favour of the sentiment of passion and emotion, but rather because it places it at the very centre of the world, a living force in struggle with the living and rebellious forces of Life. Anti-intellectual, because it denies that an order of truth and facts already exists prior to thought—already established and determined—which thought would have no choice but to take note of, bowing to it meekly; yet it is an art that affirms thought, for it is wholly imbued with the drama of thinking thought, that tireless swimmer who breaks the tumultuous waves of the ocean of Life and strives and labours to subjugate them to itself. Thought enters like yeast into the dough of Life and sets it fermenting. Therefore, reality—which for other writers is compact, homogeneous and massive like a monolith, something rigid and immobile, given once and for all and all at once—in Pirandello crumbles and breaks into planes that mesh into one another, each generated by the other. Real is not only what is commonly called such, but also, and in the same sense, everything that appears to us, in the heat of a feeling, as such: a deeply dreamt dream (cf. the short story '*The Reality of the* Dream'), a memory (cf. the short story '*Feather'*) or a daydream (cf. the short stories *'If...'*,

Remedy: Geography, The Train Whistled) – when intensely experienced, are as real to those who experience them as this vast world of things and people, which we alone are accustomed to calling 'real'. Thus, what is real for one person may not be so, or may be so in a different way, for another; and what was reality for one person fades in their eyes once the feeling that generated it has faded. In a playful vein, the short story *The Bat* recounts one such clash between different planes of reality and the troubles that arise from it.

28. – Two of Pirandello's plays, above all others, show us this living dialectic of the spirit in action: *The Reason of Others* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In **The Reason of Others**, a situation has arisen, the internal logic of which—of which the central character, Livia, is fully aware and in control—unfolds to determine the course of the action and leads the characters to the only possible conclusion. Livia, Leonardo's wife, has severed all ties with her husband since learning that he has a mistress, Elena, with whom he has had a daughter. The weary mistress would like to send her husband back to her, and she is quite willing to forgive him, but on one condition: that Elena hand over the child she had by her husband, whom she will raise as her own daughter, with those comforts that Elena, being poor, cannot provide. Elena took Leonardo as her husband and is returning him to her as a father; so, father, either stay with her and the little girl, or return to your lawful wife—but take the child with you. To have him back only half,

as her husband and the other woman's father, is out of the question. 'Home is where the children are!', and Leonardo had no children with Livia.
'Two homes? No! Me here and your daughter there? No!' (Act II). This is the situation, the inner logic of which Livia embodies and interprets: her feelings have risen to the highest possible level of rationality. Around her, the other characters move on unequal planes, but all inferior to the one on which Livia moves: in them all, passion overpowers reason, in some more, in others less. Each of them defends a particular right of their own: Elena, as a mother, who wants to send Leonardo back to Livia, but keeping the child for herself; Guglielmo, as father-in-law, who wants Leonardo to make peace with his daughter Livia at all costs, with or without the child, or for her to return to her father's house; Leonardo, as a husband newly in love with his wife and as a father who refuses to give up the child at any cost. The action is a continuous dialectic, through which all these unilateral rights and reasons gradually become aware of their own one-sidedness and are dismantled in the face of Livia's right and reason, which encompasses and absorbs them all as moments and is therefore superior to them all, being the interpreter of the child's welfare—which is the strongest right and necessity—of the child from whom she does indeed take her mother, but gives her another just as affectionate, and a father, and moreover wealth and a name.
29. – In **The Reason of Others** we see in action the dialectic whereby a superior truth or reason overcomes

inferior truths or reasons. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author* we see in action the very dialectic of the formation of truth or illusion, which is one and the same. In this marvellous play, in which a motif hinted at in the short story *The Tragedy of a Character*[23]is taken up and developed, Pirandello seeks to represent scenically the struggle and the process through which the tumult of phantoms, sprung from the artist's imagination, quivering with life but, at first, still confused and shadowy, still partly chaotic and unrealised, aspires to coalesce into a perfect and harmonious synthesis, thanks to which those elements that the artist initially perceived only as more or less distinct *patches* of colour find their balance within a broad, luminous, well-coordinated picture.

One is born an artistic character just as one is born a stone, a plant or an animal, and if the reality of the character is an illusion, every reality is also destined to be revealed as an illusion once the sentiment that nourished it has changed. He who is born a character, therefore, not only has as much life as so-called real men, but has more, for they, being changeable in every way, are this today and that tomorrow, and pass away and die; whereas the artistic character has his own imperishable life, fixed for eternity in the essential characteristics of his nature, which neither change nor can ever change. 'Nature makes use of the instrument of

23 A similar motif appears in Chapter XXXI of Miguel de Unamuno's novel **Nebbia**, which predates **Six Characters** but follows the novella **The Tragedy of a Character**.

'the human imagination to carry on, at a higher level, its work of creation' (Act I). And, once created, the character breaks away from its author, takes on a life of its own, and imposes its will upon the author, who must follow its lead and let it have its way. One fine day, six characters—whom their author had sketched out and provisionally arranged in a stage plot that he neither developed nor brought to completion—appear on stage before *the Director* of a theatre company to propose that he allow them to perform the drama that urges upon them with overwhelming and uncontrollable force from within. Not all these characters are equally realised: two, the most important (the *father* and the *stepdaughter*), are very close to perfect and complete artistic realisation; a few others, however, are little more than raw nature, a blind impression of life (the *mother*); a few others are realised lyrically and rebel against a dramatic realisation (the *son*). These six characters in search of an author are not, therefore, all on the same level of consciousness: they are the theatrical realisation of the various levels of consciousness upon which an artist's imagination has paused in an initial and interrupted creative struggle. Pirandello's play seeks to stage the labour of synthesis from which the work of art springs, the transition from life to art, from impression to intuition and expression. The tumult of the barely sketched ghosts—who, imbued with an uncontrollable life bestowed upon them by the author, which he can no longer take back—thus vie to overwhelm one another, each striving to be the centre and

heart of the work, to draw upon themselves all the director's interest and sympathy, is rendered very well through a broken, breathless, convulsive dialogue. Pirandello deeply intuited that here, in this *eccentricity* (in the literal sense of the word), in this blind rush to carry every motif and every seed through to its conclusion, lies the very essence of Nature and Life, that which distinguishes it from Spirit and Art, which is coordination, synthesis, discipline, and thus conscious choice and sacrifice.

But this, which ought to be the central theme of the play, and which indeed dominates it throughout the first act, is not adequately developed in the second and third acts, in which we do not see the characters' transition from a lower to a higher plane portrayed on stage; we do not see them moving from confusion to order, from chaos to the artistic cosmos. Those who were natural remain natural; those who were realised only lyrically remain so. The play fails to come to fruition. Why? Because the *son* rebels against playing a part in the play, because he was not born to put on a show. The play fails because, instead of a coordinating spirit, the characters encounter a run-of-the-mill theatre manager who attempts to improvise it, and a work of art cannot be improvised: it cannot be a run-of-the-mill theatre manager, lacking any experience or artistic depth, who sees only the so-called demands of the theatre, who puts on a play in a few hours, a play that can only arise from a laborious process of elaboration. But this seems to me to be a specific reason, devoid of universal value, which cannot

prove and does not prove anything. What universal significance can be drawn from the fact that a theatre hack is incapable of developing a sketched-out idea left half-finished? Of bringing to full expression characters in whom the life infused has not yet expressed itself?

In the second and third acts, the play's dominant theme intertwines with that of the distortion which lived experience undergoes as it passes through the mirror of art (a theme which recurs in the first act of **Vestire gli ignudi**). In the second act, the malevolent mirror comes into play once more, reflecting back to the individual their own image, in which they neither find nor recognise themselves: for when they see the actors—all concerned solely with the theatrical truth to be realised—repeating the gestures they made and the words they spoke in the heat of an uncontrollable passion, the characters no longer recognise themselves; they are disoriented and either laugh or despair. The mirror, in this case, is the art of the stage (but what is said of this can be said of art in general), in which, when reflected, life as commonly understood—the life of interest and passion—appears to itself distorted and falsified. But by dwelling at length on this theme, Pirandello fails to realise that in doing so, he unconsciously transforms the characters—who, let us remember, are artistic phantoms more or less realised—into real beings, transferring them from the realm of fantasy to that of lived experience, and thus introduces a dualism that fundamentally undermines the play.

But there is a third reason as well, which, in turn, interferes with the other two, adding to the confusion. Of the six characters in search of an author, each already knows what will happen to themselves and to everyone else: they have a complete overview of their fate. Whenever, for example, the *father* and *stepdaughter* find themselves at a certain point in the story and attempt to pick up the thread from there, the *mother* is present on the scene; she already knows how it will end, and her foreknowledge compels her not to watch the course of events passively, but to beg to be spared the horrifying spectacle that is about to unfold. Thus sentimental considerations may arise, attempting to disrupt the necessary architecture of a work of art, which has its own internal logic—one that is what it is and cannot be diverted by regard for the tender hearts of the audience. But this motif should have been developed more deeply and given greater prominence. It should be added that the third act, in essence, merely *treads water* where the second *left off*, and that the play's ending is utterly absurd: it is a random conclusion, tacked on simply to bring the work to a close and bring down the curtain.

Yet despite these structural flaws, the play remains the strongest attempt made so far in Europe to stage an entirely internal process of states of mind, to break down and project onto the stage the various levels and phases of a fluid and continuous process of consciousness. An attempt already made by others in Italy, but never with the intensity, audacity and breadth of ambition evident in this play. The drama

that the six characters carry within them and have not yet expressed (we saw the core of it in § 19) is typically Pirandellian. The hints that reach us, however fragmented, confused and uncoordinated as they are and must necessarily be, being still life and not art, are the most intense, powerful and truly tragic thing one can imagine.

30. – The dangers to which such a play is exposed are inherent in its very nature and can be summed up in a single word: intellectualism, and this time in the sense of dry, intellectualistic contrivance. Certainly, it is undeniable that Pirandello's characters all resemble one another like two drops of water: rather than diverse characters, they appear as a single, identical character placed in situations that are always different yet always the same. Certainly, the progression of Pirandello's art lies not in enrichment, but in the ever-greater deepening of a single, unchanging vision of the world. Just as all of Pirandello's work aspires to theatre, so all his theatre aspires to a perfect work that fully expresses the Pirandellian intuition of life: a pyramid aspiring to a point that resolves and encompasses within itself everything that lies beneath it. Often the drama is the meagre and grey scenic veneer of an abstract reflection or the conceit of a situation, which has preceded and replaced the dramatic vision: the figures appear gaunt and skeletal, frozen in a grimace, frozen in a mania that is the wooden veneer of a reflection, of a theme. The artistic value takes refuge

entirely in the details of a particular scene. Words confined to their common meaning are dull and devoid of imaginative radiance. The structure is usually a strange pictorial setting in which the abstract reflection of a psychological or metaphysical truth is framed.

But in plays born of a vivid and powerful dramatic vision, to which abstract reflection is contemporary rather than preceding (let us place among these, first and foremost, **Henry IV**; **Six Characters in Search of an Author**; **The Rattlecap**; **Thus It Is* [*If You So Think*]*; and, a little further down the list, **The Pleasure of Honesty**; **Think About It, Giacomino!**; **The Graft**; *As Before, Better Than Before*; *Clothe the Naked*), whatever is wooden and skeletal is imposed by the very nature of Pirandello's dramatic intuition; yet beneath that chill and that death, one senses life quivering—dark, muffled, subterranean—which eventually bursts forth, a frozen spasm groaning that ultimately melts into tears. Remaining consistently extremely simple (the most sober and bare, the furthest removed from literary balance, the most truly spoken language ever heard on our stages), the language of these plays is agile, witty, mobile, rich in substance and bursting with intimate vitality; the dialogue, terse and detailed, without ornamental flourishes, with immediate and apt imagery, admirably bends to follow the sinuous twists of psychological development.

31. – And the whole art of this great writer seems to us to be caught up in a magnificent upward movement. It

seems that he is gradually freeing himself from what, in his early plays, appeared to us to be his greatest flaw: the 'imbalance between the contingent particularity and pettiness of the results and the metaphysical grandeur of the pretensions with which Pirandello sets about his work' (*Voci del tempo*, p. 86). An imbalance between the metaphysical grandeur of his intentions and the plot that was supposed to express and realise them on stage: a plot driven by poor, small, pitiful petty-bourgeois creatures, inhabitants of remote provincial towns, boarders in small boarding houses, regulars at village social clubs, breathing an atmosphere that is grey, gloomy and dejected. How, for example, is the universal drama of 'to know oneself is to die' embodied in the story of the courtesan Fulvia who, after many years lived far from her husband in the most shameful abjection, returns home and contemplates the image her daughter Livia has formed of her, a daughter who neither knows nor can know that she has her mother within her; or in the story of the State Councillor Martino Lori, who, after sixteen years of incredible gullibility, realises that neither his wife nor his daughter were ever his? The pain of the wretch in the third act of *Tutto per bene* is heart-rending, but to share in it one must acknowledge in him a blindness that is absolutely incredible or, at the very least, more unique than rare, which immediately distances him from us and makes him seem almost a stranger. Of course, even in these early plays, when the meaning Pirandello seeks to extract from the plot and the plot itself manage to come together in harmonious balance, we have genuine masterpieces, such as the

The Rattling Cap. Where this balance is not achieved, beauty takes refuge in the details of a particular scene or character, mostly in the final scenes, when the mask flies off and the sorrowful face is revealed in the light. But in **Six Characters** and **Henry IV**, the metaphysical impulse breaks free from the narrow and petty frameworks with which it was once content, giving free rein to events of a broader scope. The drama pulsates with fresher and more powerful life; the metaphysical torment underlying it finds a more fitting expression. The themes remain the same, but the tragedy unfolds in a loftier and purer atmosphere. And Pirandello has not yet spoken his final word. It seems to us that he is now becoming increasingly aware of what constitutes his original dramatic core.

The Sicilian artist made his first significant step forward when, having moved beyond the phase of the rural, regional, naturalistic short stories in the style of Verga and the subsequent phase of sceptical, ironic, gimmicky short stories, and moved from short stories and novels to the theatre, he succeeded in weaving together in a dramatic relationship those themes which, in his earlier short story and novelistic output, lay side by side without any substantial connection between them, almost like explosive materials lacking the spark to ignite. In his work prior to **Fu Mattia Pascal**, the humorous synthesis (of Pirandello's distinctive humour) has not yet truly been achieved. Pirandello attempts to achieve the artistic effect * * through * * the * * form * * narrative * * dramatic

pessimistic, in the style of Verga, but the denial of intellect prevents him from embracing with his whole soul the trials and tribulations of his characters. He would have us experience as drama what in his own mind has already been overcome in a sort of philosophical and detached humour. At this stage of his art, feeling and reflection are juxtaposed rather than fused, and they disturb one another. This state of mind finds its happiest expression in **Fu Mattia Pascal**, in which pain is overcome through a resigned acceptance of it, in the conviction of its absolute futility. After this novel, Pirandello's art develops in the direction of making the synthesis of the two elements upon which it is founded ever more intimate, so that reflection is born in tandem with feeling, almost like a shadow cast by the latter. Vivid anguish increasingly eliminates from itself all ironic happiness, all expressive indifference and intermediate nuances, expressing itself in ever more stark, naked, convulsive forms. It is then that Pirandello's drama emerges as an intimate creative imperative. The artist is now making a second advance, in the sense of drawing ever closer to the expression of what constitutes his authentic dramatic core in all its purity and in all its metaphysical universality. The progress made so far offers us a sure promise of the masterpiece that cannot fail to emerge, in which Pirandello's intuition of life will conquer and fully express itself.

For now, this much is certain: that with Pirandello, Italian literature discovers for the first time that the spirit is not

that simple, two-dimensional thing it had hitherto believed it to be, but rather an abyss whose depths the gaze cannot fathom, an unexplored region resounding with strange voices, traversed in flight by phantasmagorical visions, populated by unknown monsters, where truth and error, reality and fiction, wakefulness and dream, good and evil struggle in a confused tangle, in the twilight of mystery[24] .

24 Other essays of mine on Pirandello: on **Tutto per bene** and **Come prima, meglio di prima** in *Voci del Tempo*, pp. 78–88 (the general conclusions have now been expanded upon and substantiated in this essay); on **L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù** in
'Rassegna Italiana' of July 1922; on *All'uscita* and *L'imbecille*, *ibid*., October 1922; on *Vestire gli ignudi*, *ibid*., December 1922; on *L'uomo dal fiore in bocca*, *ibid*., March 1923; on *Il dovere del medico*, *ibid*., April 1923. In § 20, the analysis of *La vita che ti diedi* is an addition to the 2nd edition.

VIII.
THE THEATRE
BY JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE

1.

Did our talented Chiarelli know *The Playboy of the Western World*, the dramatic masterpiece by the Irish writer John Millington Synge, before setting pen to paper on his successful grotesque *play The Mask and the Face*? We leave the difficult judgement to posterity: but it is certain that, at least in theory, *The Mask and the Face* has as its legitimate parent *The Playboy of the Western World*, which, perhaps with greater justification than Chiarelli's comedy, can lay claim to the label of 'grotesque'. In Synge's short body of work, this piece stands out with singular prominence.

The hero of this *reimagined Oresteia* is Christy Mahon, a simple-minded, lazy, wandering Irish peasant who, having fallen out with the gruff man who had been his guardian one day whilst they were both hoeing their little plot of land, strikes him with a spade, knocking him to the ground. Believing he has killed him, Christy flees, and for days on end he wanders the lands of Ireland on a long and arduous journey. As he goes, his fear that he has killed his father turns into certainty, and that certainty into a source of pride: knowing he is the perpetrator of such an extraordinary crime fills him with terror, but, at the same time, gives him a heightened sense of his own importance. So when, half-dead with exhaustion and hunger, he arrives at Michael's inn, and the innkeeper and the customers ask him who he is, he does not need much urging to reveal his great secret. Upon hearing it, the innkeeper and his companions feel a fear for the brave young man, mingled with

respect and admiration, and the innkeeper offers him a job as a waiter in his inn, where he will keep his daughter Pageen company, as she is afraid to be alone at night. Pageen, betrothed to a local farmer—a timid, good-for-nothing oaf—gives Christy her sweetest smile, showers him with attention, and defends him fiercely when the widow Quin rushes in breathlessly to take the hero of such an extraordinary crime home with her. Indeed, when Christy can finally go to bed, he is justified in exclaiming with satisfaction: 'I think I wasn't a fool not to have killed him a few years ago, my father!'.

It is likely that Synge intended to mock the admiration that his impassioned compatriots *on the Emerald Isle* have always held for the perpetrators of feats and exploits, however unlawful they may be, provided they stand out from the ordinary: at least that is how his compatriots interpreted his intention, for at the play's first performance in Dublin, in January 1907, they showered it with shouts and whistles. That a parricide, rather than horror, should arouse admiration and envy: this is the starting point chosen by Synge for the construction of his *grotesque*. But a *grotesque*, so as not to be entirely far-fetched, does need some connection to psychological or social reality, just as a caricature is, yes, an exaggeration of some irregularity in a person's face or body, but this irregularity must exist in nature if the caricature is not to be pure and simple invention, and

that is, no longer a caricature. Now, that peasants, however boorish, drunken and Irish one might imagine them to be, upon hearing that a fellow has killed his father, feel nothing but admiration and envy for the perpetrator of such a heroic deed—this is what may make the starting point of **The Playboy** seem excessively contrived and unreal. But if this were not inspired by the dominant and central intention of mocking the excessive admiration that Irish peasants—like, indeed, all peasants and the humble folk of this world—feel for troublemakers and outlaws, it would have little significance, and, I would say, a merely local one. In reality, anyone who stops at that satirical intention sees only the surface of the work, which springs from a depth of life far greater than it may seem at first glance and which engages our sensibilities as modern men refined by culture.

Adored and courted by the most beautiful women in the village, envied and feared by the men, Christy gradually becomes conceited: the new clothes he wears transform him, in his own eyes, into a different person. Pageen smiles at him, he loves her, and his love for Pageen and the high esteem he feels for himself lift Christy above himself, inspiring him to utter sweet words that send the girl into raptures. With exquisite subtlety, Synge sketches the emergence in Christy of the new man—gallant, enterprising, intelligent—under the warmth of sympathy and admiration he radiates around him. And it is for this conception of personality as something

which is not revealed all at once and once and for all, and from which the various events of the drama flow like water from a fountain, always unfolding on the same plane, but as something that takes shape, is created, generated and built up under the stimulus of reflection and the influences of the environment; it is for this reason that **Playboy** strikes us as a work of modern sensibility and of universal human interest. And when one considers that this superior and heroic personality has its roots in the false impression that Christy has of himself and that others have of him—namely, that he is a parricide—*the humour* gushes forth irresistibly, a *humour* that, beneath its apparent cheerfulness, is very dark and bitter, and which corrodes and dissolves human greatness and heroism.

Christy goes to the sporting events, and there yesterday's good-for-nothing wins everything and is carried in triumph like a hero. His happiness knows no bounds. The exhilaration that lifts him above himself leads him to find the sweetest words for Pageen, who listens to him spellbound. But such glory does not last long. Just then, old Mahon, Christy's father, appears; he has come to beat his son and take him home. The blow from the spade that had knocked him down had only grazed his head. Crash! The peasants turn on Christy and treat him like a charlatan, and Pageen is the angriest of all. 'But you saw my exploits today!' wails poor Christy. It's a waste of breath. Everyone is raging against him. So, in a rage, with a blow from his spade he knocks old Mahon to the ground: Pageen will marry him now that she has seen with her own eyes

seen that he is truly a hero. But she is mistaken.
'When a stranger tells us of his exploits, he seems like a hero to us, but if we happen to witness a brawl in our own backyard or a few blows with a spade, then we realise the difference between a fine tale and the miserable reality of life,' says Pageen. Seized by fear of the law, the crowd ties Christy up to hand him over to the police. Christy struggles, and Pageen, to keep him quiet, burns him with a red-hot coal. Fortunately, old Mahon reappears; not even the second blow from the spade has done him much harm. He frees his son and takes him far away. Pageen is left to mourn his lost little rascal, but the boy, who has now understood how life works, will from now on wander about telling tales and living like a gentleman.
In this second part, the play turns bitter and cruel. Christy's real and great merits are worth nothing in the face of the boast of an imaginary feat—and what a feat! Nothing less than patricide! And when he actually commits, at least in his intention, patricide with the second blow of the spade against old Mahon, not even this does him any good. Reality counts for nothing against illusion; the finest deed is worth nothing compared to the most petty little tale; the *fact* always inevitably succumbs to the fiction, even when it was the fiction that generated it and gave it life; reality may well adapt to fiction, and fiction may well insert itself into it and thus become truly alive and fruitful, yet the gulf between the two remains vast and

insurmountable: this is the ultimate lesson of Synge's *grotesque*, which thus poses and resolves a problem central to contemporary theatre, arising from a sense of unease that is universally prevalent in the European spirit of this troubled turn of the century. It is likely that Synge never had even a rough idea of the true meaning and vital importance of that problem: it matters not. This demonstrates that there are problems pervading the air without which one cannot think or live, and of which, just like the air, one does not even realise they exist.

2.

This work is linked to Synge's other theatrical productions through the portrayal of the secondary characters—Irish peasants—each marked by the imprint of their own, unmistakable reality, and, above all, through the earthy flavour that emanates from them and fills the nostrils, pungent and pleasing like the smell of the earth after the rain. Through Synge's airy, ethereal language, a vision of the Irish landscape unfolds before our eyes: its rolling hills that indent and lace the horizon, its green meadows damp with dew, soaked by the rain, with its *cottages* scattered here and there across the vast countryside, with its flocks of rambunctious sheep led by shepherds whom solitude and silence have driven to frenzy. The speech of Ireland's farmers and fishermen passes through Synge's imagination like a marvellous filter, and

is purified of all that is purely technical, ethnic and local, so that what remains—the energy, the colour, the precision of the portrayal—gains all the more in significance and rustic flavour. Synge drew this colourful element of his art directly from the people: he spent several years of his short life on the Aran Islands, in close contact with sailors, fishermen, peasants and gypsies, accompanying a small caravan of the latter on aimless wanderings through the Irish countryside. In addition to two small volumes of impressions and a handful of poems, six plays are the fruit of the poet's assiduous, loving communion with his people.

The Tinker's Wedding is a portrait of gypsy life, which, with its plebeian, restless, boisterous humour, foreshadows *Playboy*, of which it is a kind of prelude and rehearsal. In the *Shadow of the Glen* is a nostalgic celebration of the vagabond's free life, preferred to the cramped existence of the shepherd, imprisoned in his *cottage* and chained to the sheep of the flock: here too it is the harsh, rustic flavour of the vision that anchors it to the earth, gives it the colour of reality and prevents it from drifting into the abstract and vacuous realm of romanticism, as happens, for example, in Jean Richepin's *The Vagabond*. *Riders to the Sea* exudes a strong scent of the sea and resounds with the endless murmur of the stormy ocean, perpetually lurking amongst the black, glossy rocks, ready to destroy human lives.

Synge triumphs magnificently in the perilous endeavour in which so many artists have failed: that of remaining among the people without becoming subservient to them, of immersing himself in the minds of the less educated without becoming inferior himself. This inner freedom came to him through his frequent contact with and knowledge of the French Decadents of the early 20th century: always energetic, his style never ceases to be refined—not the empty refinement that bases its excellence on the preciousness of words or images, but the kind that yields only to words and images that are meaningful and expressive. From the French Decadents, particularly Maeterlinck, comes the truly dramatic element of his stage vision: firmly rooted in the countryside or the sea, it expands across boundless horizons where the great ideal forces that give meaning and direction to life quiver. *The Playboy* and *The Well of the Saints* explore the theme of the superiority of illusion over reality: the latter, however splendid, is always closed and limited; the former, however mad and unreal, always opens wide to the soul the realms of the infinite. *Riders to the Sea* is steeped in Maeterlinck's concept of fate, that obscure power whose course the individual follows, without the foreknowledge giving him the strength or will to avert it: the foreknowledge renders him resigned and cowardly, and brings the evils of the future into the present. In **Playboy** and **The Tinker's Wedding**, the earthly element is at the forefront: in **Deirdre of the Sorrows** it gives rise to a rustic drama and a mythical one, with a flavour unique in modern literature

modern literature.

In it, Synge recounts the Irish legend of the beautiful Deirdre who, though loved by the aged Conchubor, King of Ulster, fled her wedding and gave herself to the young and strong hunter Naisi, with whom she lived for seven years amongst the forests and valleys of Alban, until the king, with false promises of forgiveness, managed to lure them to his court, where he had Naisi murdered, and Deirdre killed herself over her beloved's body. In Synge's play, Deirdre willingly meets her death so that her love for Naisi might not wither away through old age or habit, for seven years of pure and intense love are many for two human beings, and it is unlikely that the gods would grant them another seven years equally beautiful and happy; and how wretched it would be if one day people were to point at them, old and listless, and whisper: 'Behold Naisi and Deirdre, who once loved one another and were young and beautiful.' The entire play is overshadowed by the prophecy of the great calamities that Deirdre's beauty will bring upon herself, upon those who love her, and upon the kingdom itself: and Deirdre serenely accepts her fate—painful, yes, but noble and glorious. The setting of the drama is rustic: Naisi is a hunter, Deirdre walks barefoot and cleans the tent where their love affair takes place; even Conchubor, though a crowned king, has none of the classical majesty of tragic kings, and his palace is a poor hut of loose planks and mats. And their language is full of wild aromas. Yet the atmosphere of passion and fate that envelops the characters is so intense that it consumes everything

that is narrow and limited in them, and turns them into primitive and mythical creatures, both fairy-tale-like and human, distant from us yet superior to us because they are bearers of the universe's unbridled primordial forces.

IX.
THE THEATRE OF LEONID ANDREEFF

To Mme Hélène Boubée.

1. – A ‘hysterical, savage, drunken chaos’, the ultimate foundation, the essential nature of things, a formless, boundless abyss, from which all that is monstrous and hideous is generated and emerges; – a soul which, fascinated, bends down to look at it; seized by horror, flees from it; having fled, returns once more to look at it and ends up plunging into it: this is the fundamental motif of the art and theatre of Leonida Andreieff.

2. – Over that whirlpool sinking into unknown depths, thought bends in vain to fathom its mystery: to the desperately repeated questions, the abyss responds with the scornful silence of its indifference. This torment of thought, which eternally knocks at the door of mystery—a door that will forever remain shut in the face of the desperate—has perhaps never been portrayed by Andreieff with greater tragic power than in **Anathema**. Anathema is the symbol of Reason reasoning, of Thought thinking, ‘immortal in figures, eternally alive in measure and weight’, yet eternally condemned to let the essence of Life slip away. With a white beard and hair, with an enormous forehead furrowed by the wrinkles of

eternally unsolved problems, grey amidst the grey stones, Anathema crawls towards the immense iron door behind which, in silence and mystery, dwells the principle of all existence, the Great Reason of the Universe, and which *Someone guarding the entrance* keeps immovably closed. The damned one alternately hurls insults and writhes in silent convulsions, taunts and desperately begs for the door to be opened, to be allowed a single glimpse of eternity: the door shall remain closed for all eternity, and upon it, like waves upon the shore, the prayers of the desperate die. 'What you ask for has no name, Anatema. There is no number by which it can be counted, no measure by which it can be quantified, no scales by which what you ask for can be weighed, Anatema.'

3. – The normal relationships of existence, built upon vital instincts, solidified by habit into conventions, customs and traditions, consecrated by society and tradition, concealing from view the irrational chaos that churns and broods beneath, give the illusion of a world unshakably firm upon its foundations, immutable in the laws that uphold it and over which Reason reigns supreme. But woe betide if the first brick of this well-built edifice should shift and fall! Soon the others follow it into ruin, and that well-ordered world of things and people, of laws and events, sinks into chaos, without thought having the strength to halt its descent. This is the drama of Lorenzo, Duke of Spadaro: is he the son of the Duke of Spadaro, Knight of the Holy Spirit and Crusader, or of the groom who seduced his bride?

while he was in the Holy Land fighting for the Lord's Tomb? 'Who am I, this man called Lorenzo, Duke of Spadaro?' And soon the doubt about the small truth of his own origins spreads to the entire universe: 'Who is the master of the world? God or Satan?... The terrible truth of human affairs. My young soul is filled with sadness.' Lorenzo wants to know: who is he? Who are those around him? The faces of all his friends and family appear to him covered with masks, beneath which he can no longer discern their faces of flesh and blood: he thinks he recognises them, yet they elude him. And more and more masks tell him they are the same person, so that he remains bewildered amidst their cries and calls. Not only himself, but everyone has become mysterious and problematic to him. He is a mask; everyone is a mask. Having lost his naive and immediate faith in reality, how can he any longer discern, amongst the infinite appearances presented to the sensitive spirit, which is true and which is false? They are all equivalent, and no choice is possible between them. Lorenzo kindles the torch of thought to explore the darkest abysses of his being, and hideous, unrecognisable masks appear before him, telling him they are his heart, his thoughts. Between being and appearance, between truth and illusion, between Satan and God, Lorenzo's spirit oscillates incoherently, in discontinuous and violent leaps: in a terrible vision, it seems to Lorenzo that he is fighting and killing himself, the credulous and carefree Lorenzo of before. And his reason sinks into madness. The world of things, of people, of

relationships in which he once lived securely dissolves back into chaos. The *black masks*—that which lay most unconfessed, mysterious and unconscious within his soul, unknown to himself even before others—invade his fathers' beautiful, ornate castle, extinguish its fires, and night envelops all. Lorenzo wanted to look deep within himself and others ('nothing dark..., nothing dark!'). He wanted, doubting everything, to arrive at something unshakeable and certain, and doubt overwhelmed him in its onslaught (*The Black Masks*).

4. – Thought is powerless to build anything outside itself because, in its very core, it is wavering and corroded: neither within itself nor outside itself, in society or in external things, does it possess the criterion of truth and certainty, and it is this that condemns man to never being able to escape the terrifying solitude of the individual self. Kergenzeff is alone, has no friends and feels no need for them; he works for himself and not for others, and therefore publishes nothing. He possesses thought, and in this possession he feels free and happy: 'My thought obeys me like a sword whose edge my will sharpens. O you, blind man, do you not see its glint? O thou, blind man, do thou not know this intoxication: to enclose here, within my head, a whole world, to command it, to reign, to flood everything with the light of divine thought!' Certain of it, he wishes to measure its greatness and strength; for this reason, he contemplates summoning, not in jest but in earnest, the very spirit of madness, with white hair and a tattered cloak. Atroce, divino gioco, in cui uno spirito debole

He would cross the line and succumb, but a strong and free spirit will reveal the full strength of its character. He has long studied the appalling tragedy of the orangutans he keeps caged in his home, who, for no apparent reason, fall ill and die of melancholy. It is that they feel like dethroned and exiled kings: suddenly, the thought within them came up against an insurmountable wall and turned back. But he, Kergenzeff, will demonstrate by his own example that there is no limit to human thought that can halt the impetus of flight, that, shut within the inaccessible fortress of thought, he feels himself to be—and truly is—God. And, indeed, he feigns madness and kills the husband of the woman he loved, who did not wish to be his wife, and whom he continued to love even after her marriage. But did he feign madness, or did he merely believe he was feigning it, whilst in fact he was truly mad? There is no way to answer this question: not even the Author could answer it, for, indeed, on the evening of the murder he shows us Kergenzeff provoked by the superficial folly of the man who will die by his hand, and informs us that, prior to the murder, Kergenzeff suffers from exhaustion and neurasthenia and has epileptic fits, but also that he has always been a deceiver, so that his exhaustion and fits might be feigned, a pretence which, in turn, might itself be evidence of incipient madness. Not even Kergenzeff himself could answer this, for immediately after the murder he is seized by a horrifying doubt: ‘It is quite possible that Dr Kergenzeff is

actually mad. He thought he was pretending, and in fact he is mad'. Locked up in the asylum for observation, he begs to be told whether he is mad or not: and he himself does not know what answer he desires. And to those who tell him he is a murderer, he replies that he is mad. To those who tell him he is mad, he replies that he would like to be a murderer. Between crime and madness, his mind wavers, incoherent and adrift. In vain, to discover the truth, he confesses his premeditation: 'Tatiana Nikolaevna, listen to me,' he cries to his victim's wife, 'I wanted to triumph, I wanted to raise myself to the pinnacle of will and free thought… to ensure that this alone was the truth. What horror! I know nothing! I have been betrayed, do you understand? My mind, which was my only friend, my love, my reason for living, my mind, in which I alone believed, as others believe in God—it, it, my mind has been my enemy, my murderer. Look at this head: within it lies an incredible terror." 'With all my intelligence, thinking, pounding on my brain like a steam hammer… I cannot decide whether I was mad or sane. The boundary is lost. O vile thought! It may prove one thing or the other, but what is there in the world outside my thoughts? Perhaps on the one hand it is evident that I am not mad, but I shall never know this. Never! Whom can I trust? Some lie to me, others do not know, and still others seem mad themselves. Who will tell me? Who will tell me?' Mascia, the illiterate nurse miraculously sane and balanced of

His spirit tells him: 'You were not mad.' Tatiana, the cultured and refined woman whom he has made a widow, replies: 'You were mad.' Whom is he to believe? Kergenzeff will remain forever walled up in the prison of his own individual thought. And the great thinker, more wretched in this than his orangutan, who, at least, feels he has come up against an insurmountable barrier and dies of melancholy, whilst he does not even know whether this barrier stands before him or not to block his path, and gropes and wavers, lost, envious of the illiterate nurse's confident certainty that she lives in the truth, so deeply rooted in it that she does not even suppose it could be posed as a problem. Thought, the divine force of thought, capitulates in defeat before the healthy, animalistic force of Life. Man falls defeated at the feet of the *unwitting, true* animal. (*Thought*).

5. – Thus, faced with thought revealing itself as a synthetic and organising force, Andreieff is struck dumb with astonishment and dread, utterly incapable of understanding. The Germans invade Belgium, and before their gigantic army, advancing with the inexorability and calm of a colossal machine, his spirit struggles in bewilderment. They project themselves onto his imagination as a force of nature, blind, anonymous, impersonal, abyssal like all forces of nature, and like these, inexorable and incomprehensible. 'They come in such a dense mass of men, iron, machines, years, horses, that there is no possibility of stopping them. It seems to me that seismographs must register in the places through which they pass,

so great is the pressure they exert upon the earth.' 'Every man has his own personality. Only they have none. When I try to picture them, I see only searchlights, motorcars, those terrible weapons of theirs... and something marching, something marching.' We resist them because we cannot help it, but without hope of victory, without understanding them and therefore without hating them. Between them and the Belgians there is no common ground; these are men and those are one of the monstrous forces of primeval chaos. Nature can only be opposed by nature: against the Germans, the Belgians oppose the brute and blind force of water, which they unleash by breaking the dams (*King, Law, Liberty*).

6. – History, understood as a chain of events sprouting from one another according to an internal dialectic that thought generates and comprehends, becomes meaningless talk; the world of human affairs has neither logic, nor continuity, nor coherence. It shatters into a dust of unconnected events. Human life is presented (in the play of the same name) as a succession of fragmentary scenes, their sequence governed by a transcendent and arbitrary fate, indifferent and impenetrable to human reason. It thus appears as the negation of Providence, the realm of chance and the irrational. And these never play out so openly as in the great crises in which the antitheses that torment history, having exhausted every other means of reconciliation and resolution, drive men onto the battlefields to seek a decision there.

To those who deny any rationality or dialectic in the sequence of human events, war appears as absurdity and madness themselves descended upon the earth: an abyss of irrationality and pain into which reason sinks, lost. Faced with the war that has suddenly descended upon Belgium, both the poet Emilio Grélier and the gardener Francesco retreat into the same attitude of frightened incomprehension: before, 'everything was so clear on earth'; once war has broken out, everything is absurdity and madness. An explosion of the forces of chaos, war appears itself to be a living, undulating chaos; it is the howling of distant crowds, the distant rumble of cannons, the blare of trumpets and bells, it is terror in the face of something superhuman and mysterious passing by, it is the collective delirium of armies fleeing from unknown dangers, it is death, suffering, fear.

7. – Fear above all. In a world like this, where from one moment to the next the mysterious forces of chaos can blow apart the fragile shell of conceptual and practical constructs that conceal it, Fear can at any moment sweep reason away into the maelstrom of madness. And there is certainly no need for extraordinary events for this to happen: it is enough that, tearing himself away from the drowsiness of habit that has made their appearance familiar to him, man looks at the ordinary, everyday things with fresh eyes, and they will appear to him mysterious and formidable, like an enemy lying in wait. Thus an empty chair that he sees in an empty house fills Petia with such terror that he begins to

To cry out (*Towards the Stars*). For beyond and through the small, harmless things of everyday life, the soul perceives the universe into which it has been cast, without knowing where, why, or how it came to be there: a sea of darkness in which it swims without a fixed destination, and into which, from one moment to the next, it may sink, and to which, in the end, it is doomed to sink. It is Fate: and Andreieff has personified it in *'Someone in Grey'* in *The Life of Man*, a character who watches and knows, without acting, for there is no need to act, everything being predestined from eternity; an impassive spectator of what transpires in the life of Man, who breaks his silence only to announce its defining moments. Always present and always motionless, only in certain moments does he emerge silently from the wall against which he leans, almost blending into it. When, having completed his cycle of small joys and great sorrows, Man ends his existence as he began it, *Someone in Grey* raises his cold, indifferent, distant voice: – Silence! Man is dead! – On the edge of this unfathomable abyss, all human turmoil comes to an end: the buzzing of bees inside an empty hive, breaking the terrifying silence of the worlds for but a moment. *Towards the stars,* everything is filled with the contrast between the clamour of human turmoil – conspiracy, revolution, reaction – and the profound silence of the astronomical observatory lost amidst the mountains, where the ebb of that turmoil comes to die. The castaways of the revolution enter the observatory noisy, full of life and of

attachment to human things: little by little the deadly silence of the celestial spaces seizes them, fills them with dread, leads them to the brink of madness. And they curse science which, alien and indifferent to the anguish of men, stands quietly observing the course of the worlds; they curse the hostile and malevolent stars. 'They shone when we were still certain of victory, and now that all is lost they shine just the same. It's enough to drive one mad!' 'Down with science! It's useless... Down with the accursed stars! I hear them screaming!'

8. – The superiority of spirit and intellect brings nothing but deeper and more intense suffering. An infinite longing for beauty, purity and goodness torments Andreev's heroes, yet they lack the strength to fight valiantly to realise, amidst the hostile material world that surrounds them and weighs upon their souls, the ideal that shines in their spirits: at the first blow that reality deals to their dreams, they admit defeat and abandon the struggle.

Here is Giorgio Stibelew, a famous lawyer and politician: all his ingenuity cannot prevent him, at the first unjust suspicion that his wife Caterina is betraying him, from firing three shots from his revolver at her, which, true, leave the woman's body unharmed, but kill everything that was innocent and pure living within her soul. And Caterina descends step by step down the staircase of vice without Giorgio being able to hold her back, and he descends with her (*Caterina Ivanovna*).

Here is Kergenzeff, whose genius serves only to make him commit a foolish crime and lead him to the asylum where he will writhe in agony for eternity in the horrendous dilemma: madman or criminal?

Here is *the one who takes the blows*: he is a superman, a god-man, from whom a mediocrity has stolen honour, love and fame. And all that remains for him is to destroy himself as the individual he once was, to annihilate himself even in name, burying himself in a circus, where, in the grip of a lucid delirium of self-abasement, he dons the mask of the most despicable clown, the one who makes people laugh by reciting lofty and solemn speeches that his circus colleagues interrupt with slaps. Against the life that has destroyed him, *That One* takes his revenge by debasing within himself the god that every man every man, carries within himself, becoming *He who takes the slaps*, so that in him all may slap themselves, their essence and dignity and divinity as men, the ideal and the dream of their lives, for with the slaps that all give him he in himself outrages Life itself: he becomes a Christ who dies but not to be reborn; who suffers, not to redeem, but to take revenge; who condenses within himself all the horror of the world so that in him the Life that has offended him may strike and outrage itself. He is the betrayed *superman* who, to take his revenge, becomes *a subhuman*. Yet even from the depths of the abyss into which he has plunged, light and hope still smile upon him: he falls in love with Consuelo, the beautiful horsewoman; or rather, in Consuelo he rediscovers spring, youth, the promise of life, the purity glimpsed in a dream, the ideal longed for but never

possessed. But Consuelo wants to become a grand lady and, without a single regret, will marry the rich and repulsive Baron, and when *He* declares his love to her, she slaps him. And *He*, with sweet sadness, without hatred, to save from herself the purity that, unbeknownst to her, lies within her, the love that her whole marvellous being inspires, that she carries within her, that she is, offers her a cup of poisoned champagne and follows her into death by drinking from it himself. But not even in death does he manage to be the first. The Baron kills himself before him, and *That One* breathes his last, moaning: 'Did you love her so much, Baron? Did you love her so much, my Consuelo? And do you wish to go before me even there? No! I am coming! And we shall fight over her again… even there… And we shall see whose she will be, forever…'. (*The one who takes the slaps*).

Here is Storizin, the great scientist whom Russia honours. A man of superior intellect, he possesses an exquisite and painful sensitivity and delicacy: what strikes him deeply is 'the disheartening lack of nobility in our lives'. 'There are people who take pleasure in catching a thief, apprehending a criminal or exposing a liar. Such people astonish me greatly. I, on the other hand, when faced with a liar, feel so embarrassed that I help him to lie, even if the lie is directed against me'. He dreams of a life of pure beauty and purity, yet all around him is shame and ruin: one son has run away from home; another steals his books; his wife's lover lords it over the household in the most vulgar manner and commits frauds for which

responsibility falls on him. Storizin is the blind man who does not see because he does not want to see, lost as he is in his empty idealistic dreams: after an initial transgression, his wife had sworn to be faithful to him, and he, relying on that oath, denied the very evidence of the facts proving that his wife had already broken her vow. The responsibility for the physical and moral ruin into which he and his family will fall lies entirely with him, who abandoned his wife and children to their own devices, utterly lost as he was in his studies and his platonic loves. When he can no longer close his eyes to the vile reality surrounding him, he drinks himself into a stupor to numb his senses, and begs his son to take him to a disreputable house. Driven from his home, he takes refuge with a friend. When, at last, his son drives out the wretch who has ruined him with his fists, his heart cannot bear the sight of life's horrendous reality and breaks within his chest (*Professor Storizin*).

Here is Teodoro Kostomaroff, the protagonist of *Anfissa*. Nourished by poorly digested Western culture, he poses as a superman: other men are to him nothing but raw material upon which to stamp the seal of his personality, instruments that have no reason to exist except insofar as they serve to fulfil the ends of his ego, which he imagines to be pervaded by a proud need for domination. Ambitions without substance: he is a weakling, condemned to succumb to the dominion of dark inner impulses, which his intellect cannot illuminate, nor his will direct; a typically Russian hybrid

of an Asian temperament with a poorly assimilated Western culture, a troubled and listless soul, tormented by a vague longing for an ideal he knows he cannot achieve, and which gnaws at him. With a temperament somewhere between the erotic and the sadistic, Teodoro falls in love with Anfissa the moment he sees her standing before him, surrounded by an aura of chastity. Having come at the invitation of his sister Alessandra, his wife, to remind him of his conjugal duties, Anfissa seems to him inaccessible and impregnable: he throws himself into loving her desperately, makes her madly in love with him, and takes her. Anfissa becomes his mistress, and to remain by his side she endures the harshest humiliations at the hands of her sisters and the servants. For this very reason, in Teodoro's eyes she falls from the pedestal upon which he had seen her stand, distant and inaccessible, and becomes an ordinary woman, whom anyone who wishes may make his mistress. He shows her, in the harshest manner, his contempt, his cruel satisfaction at seeing her suffer because of him; but one day, when Anfissa, exasperated by her sisters' humiliations and Teodoro's taunts, in a fit of desperation cries out to everyone that he is her lover and that he is now making advances towards her other sister, Nina, Teodoro feels his fascination rekindled and drives away friends, relatives and his wife so as to keep only Anfissa by his side. The woman in whom he had grown accustomed to seeing nothing but a victim has revealed herself to him in an unusual display of defiance, and this, by the very act of distancing him from her, has drawn him back to her. But the gesture he has made of placing himself above morality and society is too great a burden for him to bear and has exhausted him:

after a few hours, his act becomes alien and incomprehensible to him. Anfissa appears to him as a stranger of whom he knows nothing. He must leave with her, and all it takes is for Nina to reappear, abandoning herself entirely to him in a gesture of devotion, for him to think of nothing but seizing the fresh prey offered to him. And Anfissa, without hatred, out of love, almost as if to give her beloved the peace he had always sought in vain in life, poisons him.

Even the noblest and purest are powerless and defenceless in the face of life, and in the end they collapse, defeated. Here is Ternovsky from *Towards the Stars*: a great astronomer, devoted with his whole being to the science he loves; the vision of the endless spaces where worlds revolve, of the infinite time in which he sees the stars born and die, robs him of all sensitivity to the sufferings of the small planet whose soil he treads, of the brief span of time he fills with his life. And even when his son Nicola, the very embodiment of beauty, loses his mind due to the mistreatment inflicted upon him in prison, he remains calm and detached, his gaze fixed upon the laws of immortal life. Here is Davide Leiser from *Anatema*: his kindness leads him to distribute among the poor the millions he received from Anatema, and soon he finds himself as poor as before. But the crowd still wants money and miracles, and since Davide can neither create gold nor raise the dead, they stone him. His goodness has no other result than to lead him to death and those who have believed and will believe in him to crime, and to increase universal weeping and misery. The futility of human greatness is symbolised in the

the protagonist of *The Life of Man*. He is a superman, a demigod; he creates new forms of life and beauty, but, after a brief period of splendour, his son dies, his genius withers, his works are no longer appreciated, and he fades away in solitude and misery, clinging to the faint hope that his work, no longer linked to his name, might outlive him. It is the downfall of *the superman*. In his deepest essence, Andreieff is the *anti-Nietzsche*.

Nor do those who keep to a lower level and practise a more down-to-earth kindness fare any better. Unable to fight valiantly to ensure the triumph of the goodness they hold in their hearts, this goodness resolves itself for them into weakness and unhappiness. And either they go to ruin or live in misery and misfortune. Such are Modest from *Professor Storizin* and Tatarinof from *Anfissa*. The superman has no friends around him, nor can he have any: nothing can tear him away from the terrifying solitude of his individual self. 'When someone suddenly recognises his own greatness, he is shaken and fears the boundless solitude and superhuman anguish. Ah, it is a terrible thing when anguish touches a divine soul!'

9. – In a world like this, a woman has no truly essential role; even when she is not one of the forces of ruin and death that bring the superman to ruin, even when she spreads comfort and joy around her and illuminates the funereal desolation of things with a smile, she cannot prevent the final ruin. Here is Tatiana of *Thought*: an intelligent collaborator

, a wife deeply in love with her husband, shaken by fearful premonitions, she repeatedly warns him to defend himself against the danger that threatens him. But Saveloff does not listen to her and succumbs at the hands of Kergenzeff. Here is Marussia from **Towards the Stars**, the ardent and impetuous revolutionary, a heroic and fresh-faced creature, madly in love with her Nicola, so handsome and intelligent, whom she manages to save from death and imprisonment, only to find him reduced to a pitiful wreck of a man, a bestial idiot who will vegetate happily for a long time. And these are the best, the purest, the noblest. The others, whether by clear and conscious choice or by force of circumstance, are instruments of ruin and death: Anfissa; her sister Nina, a wholly feminine embodiment of devotion and self-surrender, amoral and innocent as a force of nature; Consuelo, the young circus horse-rider where *That One* takes the slaps, a creature of animal beauty and vigour, naive and flirtatious, amoral and innocent, who loves the horse-rider Besano and marries the rich and repulsive Baron out of calculation, follows *That One* into the enchanted realms of dreams and ideals where *That One* transports her with the magic of his words evoking spells and wonders, but slaps him when, declaring his love for her, he seeks to turn that illusion into reality, and thus, through the love she inspires in *Quello*, leads him to murder and death; Elena, the beautiful and refined wife of Storizin, who has become the mistress and accomplice of a failed man of letters, vents the bitterness of her unfulfilled life with the crudest insults against her husband

of his mistress, whom he leads to disgrace and death; Katerina Ivanovna, in whom the shots her husband fires at her without hitting her awaken all that lies dormant within her of dark, evil corruption: still innocent when, believing herself betrayed, her husband tried to kill her, she gives herself to her supposed lover in a surge of rebellion against her own wounded pride, and thus takes the first step down the ladder of degradation on which she can no longer stop and which she travels to the very end, corrupting everything within and around her: a sleepwalker of vice, she is horrified and repulsed by what she does and, yet, cannot help but do it; Vasilisa Petrovna from *'Thou Shalt Not Kill!'*, who, driven by hatred, ambition and greed, leads her master to his death and brings ruin upon herself and her accomplice Yakov.

10. – Do the forces of evil therefore always prevail in Andreyev's world? On the surface, yes. But these forces never take the form of strong, energetic, malevolent personalities; they remain vague, diffuse, impersonal and anonymous, malevolent vapours rising from chaos. In Andreyev's world, there is no place for great, malevolent characters. His conception of life is radically dualistic. 'In what a fog do we live? Listen to all the words man has uttered since the day of his creation, and you will say: he is God! Cast a glance upon all his deeds, from his earliest days, and you will exclaim with revulsion: he is a beast!' Everyone is a 'little lost God who will never find – on earth – the way to heaven'. 'Everything in the world yearns for the

'Goodness, and yet he cannot find it; everything in the world craves life, yet finds only death.' Good is the favour granted for a moment by fate; it is the ideal longed for in dreams; it is the memory of a state of innocence and purity which the soul perhaps enjoyed before descending into this life, in a world of heavenly splendours where, through desire, it takes refuge from the ugliness of this one; it is never the good will of those who struggle valiantly to assert a higher order of values upon the harsh, rebellious reality. On this side of the good lies evil, irreconcilable with it because it is alien and indifferent to it: an amorphous chaos of brute forces, which cannot be disciplined and upon which it is impossible to build. Evil lies more in things than in men. Those who are its architects are the first to suffer from it, condemned as they too are to final defeat: Savich, who robs Storizin of peace and honour, is a failure gnawed by envy, whom a boy's slaps will eventually set straight; the Lord who has robbed *That One* of love and fame sees the shadow of his hated rival everywhere and has no peace; Jakow of *'Thou shalt not kill!'* who, solely because Vasilisa begs him to, kills a man and accepts before God to bear upon his soul the full weight of the sin, and all this not because he loves Vasilisa or anyone else in the world, nor out of greed for money; on the contrary, because he despises everyone and feels superior to all men and to everything they hold dear, love, honour, life, and which for him carry no weight whatsoever: and yet, in the long run, the remorse of having killed him overcomes him and ruins him. Remorse that is not

a leaven of purification and spiritual transcendence; it is not reabsorbed into the good as its dialectical moment, nor does it prepare the way for it as its negative condition. Between good and evil lies the abyss. Evil is a grey swamp whose putrid waters lap at the walls of what good will has built: in the long run, nothing resists that slimy caress, and even the sturdiest structures end up crumbling. It is the tragedy of solitude and renunciation, the most desperate cry of the impossibility of living without dreaming and of dreaming whilst living. Leonida Andreieff's dramas are dramas of crumbling, of ruin, of liquefaction and inner dissolution: man struggles a little, then ends up sinking. And if he attempts a new construction, this too ends up in ruin. It is the monotonous 'so it was, so it shall be' of the clock of the Revolution. That is why they are entirely lacking in plot, thesis, character: everything that, by providing direction, gives meaning to life. Life has neither meaning nor direction; it is a futile floundering amidst a chaos into which one ultimately sinks. This is why Andreev's art appears to be entirely analytical, composed wholly of detached details, which his gaze fixes with hallucinatory intensity, under which they assume the immense and grotesque proportions of nightmarish images. Capturing the figures in the process of dissolution, Andreieff's art does not rest until that process is complete, and passions, feelings and actions have dissolved into their primordial elements.

11. – And yet, Andreieff is not a radical pessimist. Precisely because the very essence of being appears to him as a seething chaos, which cannot even conceptually be confined within certain, defined boundaries, a small glimmer remains open through which hope filters its light. A twilight hope, yet one that casts a faint glow upon the darkness of this desolate world, and if it does not console us from the horror of real life, it at least serves to make it a little more bearable. It is the hope of a new life, symbolised in the embryo that Francesca carries in her womb, whilst her husband, the mad Lorenzo di Spadaro, burns in the castle ablaze; it is the hope of a new world and a new people that glimmers in Emilio Grélier's imagination whilst all around him Belgium is blood and mines; but this hope, far from being the projection into the absolute of forces already working for the better within the bosom of present reality, far from becoming part of it and continuing it by transcending it, hovers above it, separated from it by an abyss: it is a hope that connects nothing to present reality, that is not reattached to it by any thread, and which therefore appears entirely arbitrary. Messianism without conviction or enthusiasm. And so it must necessarily be. It is reality as such that repels Andreieff, and not this or that form of reality. Hope can appeal to him only insofar as it hovers above reality, separated from it by a void, unconnected to it by any thread. The day the ideal began to take shape and

take shape, Andreieff would renounce it for that very reason. He is the discontented and the restless, destined to remain so for all eternity.

12. – The play in which Andreieff perhaps best expressed his dualistic intuition of life and the world is **The Ocean**: a work of extremely difficult comprehension, which, alongside areas of profound darkness, contains passages of dazzling, mesmerising beauty. The centre of this bizarre and obscure play lies in the antagonism between the Ocean and the Organ: the Ocean, symbol of the savage, furious, hysterical chaos that lies at the very bottom of all things, and the Organ, which, with sounds stolen from the storm, attempts to speak to God and lead the human soul back to him, symbol of the efforts and constructs through which the soul seeks to tame the savage chaos it feels roaring within itself and to realise a pale image of divine life. Xorre, an unconscious and amoral drunkard, is the man of the Ocean: the Ocean is his master and his god; having come ashore with Haggarth from the pirate ship of which he is the boatswain, he feels a deep longing for it. He despises the fishermen who venture out onto it only when it is calm, who love it, yes, but like a goat they milk, and in their hearts they hate and fear it. Dano is the man of the Organ, and when the Ocean, through the voice of the waves, exhales all its deep and dark anguish, he counters it with the passionate anguish of the human soul through the sounds of the Organ and speaks to God of the gravest matters. He hates and despises the Ocean—'ugly, hissing, furious puddle, Satan's salty spittle'—he curses it and

fears it. Between the two men, the embodiment of the two metaphysical principles of reality—the amoral, incoherent and mad nature, and the spirit, that passionate and sorrowful yearning towards God—there reigns mutual hatred and incomprehension.

Of the two, Haggarth, the captain of the pirate ship, is the man over whom the Ocean and the Organ are vying. He has fled from the Ocean, whose mad, unbridled, dark life he once lived, whose waters he illuminated with the fires of the ships he sank: from the remorse of his crimes he sought refuge on land, first in drunkenness, then in work and family, and found none. For the Ocean ever speaks to him with voices of mystery and sorrow, tempting him, fascinating him, and, at last, drawing him back into its dreadful whirlpool: he kills a man. But on the night of the murder, the organ's song rises, and Haggarth, with bloodstained hands, runs to the church to listen to its mysterious and solemn voice, and his soul twists in unbearable agony. And finally he tears himself away from the land where terrifying dreams are dreamt—dreams of goodness, of the ideal, of God—and definitively surrenders himself, his heart filled with profound, immortal sorrow, to the Ocean, to the wild and mad chaos. Does the Ocean, Nature, Evil, therefore triumph definitively? No, for whilst Haggarth boards the pirate ship, on land Dano gathers the pipes of the organ that Xorre, upon departing, destroyed with ferocious rage: the Organ will be rebuilt and once more man will speak to God. For eternity the two principles of being will stand face to face;

eternity they will vie for the heart of man; for eternity the struggle will remain undecided and the battle will be resumed.

13. – From the same spiritual perspective from which **The Ocean** was born comes the drama **Sawa**. Of the two conflicting protagonists, who is right: Sawa or Lipa? The question receives no answer, nor can it receive one. In Sawa, the anarchist, the nihilist who savagely denies everything man has done so far—everything man has done so far being nothing but a prison in which the spirit dies—and who wishes to restore freedom to man by returning the earth to its primitive nakedness, Andreyev has expressed his longing for pure activity, for infinite freedom, which is sated only by the unlimited and the indeterminate, and which rejects reality—all reality—simply because it is reality, that is to say, necessarily, determination and limitation. Everything that is, by the very fact of existing, is the past, death, error and madness that must be destroyed with iron and fire. 'Man today must remain naked upon the naked earth. Then a new life will be built.' 'I want to annihilate facts, facts! To break the prison in which ideas lie hidden and give them wings and open up for them a new, vast, invisible space! In fire and lightning I want to transcend the limits of the world.' And if man refuses the freedom that Sawa offers him, well, let him vanish from the earth and let life be over. He is the loner who loves and hates no one in particular: his hatred is entirely metaphysical and supra-empirical, a hatred of all that is, simply by virtue of being and being this way or that. But Sawa's fierce rationalism, for which nature

reason, freedom and absolute destruction are equivalent terms, engages for itself only one side of Andreieff's soul.

In Lipa he represents the other half of his soul, made up of infinite love for mankind, of infinite pity for their errors, their pains so great and so futile, their illusions however childish, their efforts however unsuccessful or failed. Lipa shudders when Sawa reveals his desire to destroy the old, cherished beliefs in which human suffering has found refuge and comfort over the centuries. He has made a pact with the monk Condrati to blow up the sacred icon, the object of the common people's fervent worship, during the solemn moment of the pilgrimage. Lipa dissuades Condrati from taking part in the scheme, and Condrati, remorseful, reveals the criminal plan to the prior. The shrewd prior puts the icon in safety, allows the explosion to take place, then returns the sacred image to its place, where it appears intact. The gullible crowd cries out that it is a miracle. But Lipa and Condrati also cry out that it is a miracle, even though they know full well how things really happened. The will to believe is so powerful and irresistible in them that it sweeps aside every obstacle in its path and prostrates itself in adoration before what it knows perfectly well to be the most vulgar of tricks. If Sawa's reason and freedom are nothing but destruction and death, Lipa's faith is nothing but conscious self-deception. If Sawa wishes to restore man to his primitive nakedness, the refuge Lipa offers him is built upon deceit and fraud, sustained by a voluntary

self-blinding, and breeds crime and death. If Sawa is defeated—for through the prior's deceit he sees the chains he sought to break re-fastened upon humanity's wrists, and his act of rebellion becoming the indirect architect of new servitude— Lipa is also defeated, for she cannot offer human misery the refuge of faith unless she voluntarily blinds herself to the fraud upon which that faith is founded and becomes its accomplice.

In truth, human suffering is infinite, incurable and hopeless, and in comparison with it, everything else is nothing: and Andreieff projects this state of mind onto 'Tsar Herod', the peasant who unwittingly killed his son, and from that moment on wanders the world, jealously clutching his boundless grief to his heart. Is everything, then, doubtful and mysterious except our pain? Perhaps even pain is an illusion, a dream like everything that appears. And perhaps we ourselves do not exist. In Speranski, Andreieff projects this doubt of universal illusionism. 'The swallows! They are flying: and what does that matter to me? Perhaps these swallows do not exist. And all this is merely a dream... I walk, I walk until I am weary, until I am exhausted, then I come to my senses and I am here again. Monastery, towers: the hours pass. Everything – like a dream. I close my eyes: nothing remains. I open them: everything appears once more. Sometimes I go out into a field at night and close my eyes, and it seems to me that there is nothing left. Only suddenly something cries out, a cart passes over the cobblestones; then it seems like a dream again. For if my ears are closed, then I hear

anything. I shall die, all will fall silent, and then it will be the truth. Only the dead, Sawa Iegorovich, know the truth.' 'Here they buried a woman who had died of grief because her husband had been run over by a train. What happened in that brain before death is terrible to think of: but she lay peacefully: because she knew that her grief was only a dream, a dream-vision'. That is why Speranschi does not work and is indifferent to everything. That is why to Tiuca, to whom he has confided his doubts, humanity appears as an immense procession of animal-like muzzles: muzzles, nothing but muzzles. Between Speranschi-Tiuca, Sawa and Lipa, whose side does Andreieff take? None of them. These characters are three immobile projections of three sides of his soul, and between them there is no exchange of positions, no mutual integration, no overcoming, no dialectical development, but only a pendulum-like motion that propels the poet's soul from one to the other, in a cycle of discontent and restlessness that has no end. They are stylised and immutable spiritual positions, not individualities that assert themselves vigorously and realise themselves as units of character through the flow of particular events.

14. – In Andreieff's theatre there are no *characters* in the traditional sense of the word: the *character* would contradict his conception of man. For him, a man is a being who knows neither where he comes from nor where he is going, moved, like a puppet, by the strings of passions, driven hither and thither by chance and fortuitous circumstances, depressed in some moments until the

despair, or, in others, elation verging on intoxication. Intelligence has been bestowed upon him merely as a vain adornment, to make speeches and declamations and to construct a faith or goal that he is incapable of realising in life. There is a lack of personality, a lack of individuality, a lack of what distinguishes one man from another: all men resemble one another like the leaves of a forest or grains of sand; at their very core, they are anonymous and impersonal. This explains Andreieff's affinity for the anonymous or nameless figure, which features so prominently in his plays. This explains his prodigious power to breathe life and soul into beings alien to humanity: in **Towards the Stars**, the stars appear as cruel, mocking beings and enemies of man; in the marvellous first act of *King Hunger*, the machines stand before the workers like monstrous and hostile deities, the inexorable architects of their servitude, and perhaps no writer, not even Victor Hugo, has succeeded in imbuing the Ocean with the prodigious life it possesses in the play of the same name. Its real image is closely intertwined with its symbolic and metaphysical meaning, and it appears as a living force, anguished and malevolent, from which, with the roar and the whistle of the wind, with the breath of the breeze, with the murmur and the scream of the waves, emerge the suggestions and temptations that unsettle the mind and sweep it into madness: madness, temptation, and crime are, like the roar of the waves and the whistle of the wind, acts of the Ocean's life. Man, having lost his distinguishing traits, sees the boundary between himself and things abolished, and lives

a life of reverie, of nightmare, of terror. Every man is but the point where the anonymous and irresponsible forces of chaos momentarily intersect and balance one another. Lacking individuality, man offers but feeble resistance to a fantastical process that denies him as a single, particular individual and posits him as a symbol or sign of universal forces and realities.

In Andreieff's art, symbolism is a necessary element. Not always a satisfying one, however. What, for example, does the centenarian grandmother in *Anfissa* symbolise, as she sits eternally in an armchair, knitting stitch after stitch, pretending to be deaf and silently witnessing the collapse of Teodoro's family? The slow passage of time that knows all, has seen all, and is therefore deaf and indifferent to everything? The matter is unclear, and the process of transforming that new-style Teresa Raquin into a symbol has failed to achieve its aim. What does the *Lord* mean who has robbed *That One* of fame, love and honour? The crowd which, whilst hating and despising him, drags itself in the footsteps of the genius, feeds on his ideas, adopts them whilst vulgarising them, and in the awareness of its own inferiority hates him mortally? What does the Baron symbolise, who wishes to marry Consuelo, and of whom it is said that he is the spider weaving the web to catch the fly? Perhaps everything in life that is treacherous, specious and creeping? This is not entirely clear, and these figures remain halfway along the path leading from ordinary reality to symbolism. But for the most part, the symbolic projection

of the characters is perfectly successful: man is reabsorbed into the impersonal forces of the universe, emptied of all individuality and personality. Thus, in **Quello**, the eternal dream of the ideal is symbolised—a dream that the reality of life eternally mocks and slaps in the face. Thus, in *The Ocean*, the symbolism of the Organ and *the Ocean* rises effortlessly above the harsh, sombre realism of the painting, broadening and lightening it. Thus, in **The Thought**, the symbols are elementary and sober, of crystalline clarity and obviousness (Mascia, the illiterate nurse, and the orangutan in the first act).

15. – The process of symbolisation is always the same, and consists of creating a void around certain figures set in indeterminate and vague settings, to which the vagueness of the motifs and the obscurity of the transitions lend something both primitive and, at the same time, definitive, lying beyond time and history. The danger to which this art all too often succumbs is that of mistaking abstraction for symbol, death for universal life. Hence the frequent puffing out of cheeks in the vain effort to say definitive and eternal things; hence the deformation of the symbol into a puppet, albeit one of monstrous proportions. *King Hunger*, symbol of the eternal cycle of hunger that breeds servitude, revolt and new servitude, and so on ad infinitum, is typical in this respect: in place of symbols there are nothing but abstractions, and the whole narrative that the work is meant to symbolise as universal and eternal takes on such a puppet-like and grotesque aspect that one does not know whether the poet is

is mocking what he says or means it seriously. But symbolically, only the principal figures are drawn: for the others, created to highlight the spirituality of those, a few realistic touches suffice. In Andreev's drama, the constant interweaving of symbolism and realism—a dry, arid realism, sometimes forced to the extreme of the grotesque—is necessary, if at its core lies the central insight into the futile struggle of lofty, noble, pure souls to extricate themselves from the crude materiality of the world that surrounds them, suffocates them, and to which they ultimately succumb, a world which, therefore, must be represented in its realistic triviality and banality. For the essential characteristics of a work of art, and all the more so the more original it is—that is, the more it is a work of art—are determined by the intuition of life and the world upon which it is founded; nor can they be understood or judged in any other way than by continually returning to this intuition, that is, to what might be called the philosophy immanent in the work of art, as it has historically come into being.

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